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Special Committee on Electoral Reform

EVIDENCE

Tuesday, October 4, 2016

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Chair

Mr. Francis Scarpaleggia

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● (1335)

[*English*]

The Chair (Mr. Francis Scarpaleggia (Lac-Saint-Louis, Lib.)): We'll open the meeting. Welcome to the 36th meeting of the Special Committee on Electoral Reform. It's our first stop in Atlantic Canada, and we're very pleased to be here.

We have three panels today.

On the first panel we have, appearing as individuals, Professor James Bickerton and Professor Kenneth Dewar.

I'll explain briefly to the witnesses how we've been operating. Each witness will have 10 minutes to present their ideas, and that will be followed by a round of questions whereby each member of the committee will have five minutes to interact with the witnesses. It's possible that at the end of the five minutes you may not have had a chance to fully answer to your satisfaction, but you can pick up where you left off the next time you have the microphone, if you wish. We're pretty free and easy about things like that.

Without further ado, I will give the floor to Professor Bickerton, please.

Mr. James Bickerton (Professor, As an Individual): Thank you very much. Since our time is tight I'll try to get right to my presentation. I hope you don't mind if I read it. I think that would also make it easier for me.

The Chair: All I would ask of the witnesses, for the benefit of the interpreters, is not to read too quickly because they have to keep up.

Mr. James Bickerton: Okay, thank you.

The question of reforming Canada's electoral system presents both a first-order and second-order problem for party politicians, political analysts, interest groups, and the Canada polity as a whole.

The first-order problem, assessing the pros and cons of the current first-past-the-post system and its main alternatives, has essentially been solved to the satisfaction of most knowledgeable observers engaged in the study of comparative electoral politics and voting behaviour. It has been extensively investigated, documented, and analyzed by academic scholars, specials commissions, and citizens' assemblies. Indeed, at the provincial level, there have been a number of royal commissions and citizens' assemblies that have identified and recommended to their respective legislatures and public, a best alternative to first past the post.

I think it is fair to say that the results are in. As is often repeated, the concerns about alternative electoral systems to first past the post will never be to everyone's complete satisfaction since there are no

perfect systems on offer, but by and large, there is an emerging consensus that the serious democratic deficits of first past the post are damaging to the overall quality and long-term functionality of Canada's version of representative democracy.

Further delay in reforming the system seems increasingly difficult to justify. As well, it seems to me that the fundamental principles that should guide the choice of any alternative voting system for Canada are fairly clear and agreed upon. The motion establishing this committee, with its five principles for electoral reform, is a case in point.

Finally, there are the vexing technical questions of how best to incorporate these principles into a viable alternative voting system that would meet Canada's specific needs. As they say, the devil is in the details. However, these technical questions have been addressed fairly successfully elsewhere, through a range of innovations and modifications to standard voting systems. These include hybrid systems such as MMP that seek to combine the benefits of first past the post and PR, the use of seat thresholds to reduce the fragmentation of the vote and eliminate fringe parties, open lists that give more power to voters and allow them to choose between party candidates, ranked ballots that ensure that winning candidates in single member constituencies are supported by a majority of voters, and differential treatment for very large or remote ridings.

I think there are ready solutions available to the first-order problem of electoral system reform.

No similar consensus, however, has emerged on the second-order problem of how and when Canada's politicians might bring about this needed reform of the electoral system. The second-order problem starts with getting sufficiently broad agreement across the political class on both the need for electoral reform and the timeliness of pursuing it now as opposed to in some indefinite future; on which of the many alternatives to the current system is preferable; and finally, on the mechanics of managing the process of moving to a new system, the steps that should be taken, the institutions and individuals involved, the timeframe for implementation, and so on.

It is the second-order problem, it seems to me, that has really bedevilled the electoral reform question in Canada. The distortions in regional representation created by first past the post, the negative long-term political impacts of these representational distortions, and the perverse partisan incentives to double down on political behaviours and strategies that reinforce and perpetuate them were first subjected to intensive scholarly analysis by Professor Alan Cairns in a seminal 1968 article in the *Canadian Journal of Political Science*. Cairns identified the institutional defects of the first-past-the-post system and their deleterious effect on the character and tenor of national politics and on the quality of representative democracy in Canada. These same defects have been identified time and again in subsequent studies of electoral processes and outcomes.

● (1340)

To briefly summarize, as I'm sure you've been made aware repeatedly in your hearings, these defects are the disproportionality of election results, often severe; the regional amplification effect, so clearly evident in the 2015 result here in Atlantic Canada; the suppression of diverse voices in parliaments and legislatures; the suppression of voter turnout; the detrimental long-term impact on democratic engagement and system legitimacy; and finally, its facilitation, if not exaggeration, of the systemic bias within the Westminster model of parliamentary democracy toward executive dominance.

In 2005 Professor Roger Gibbins, another respected senior political scientist in Canada, revisited the Cairns analysis and updated it to include all the federal election outcomes in the intervening years. He found that not only had the pathological patterns identified by Cairns continued, but arguably they had worsened. This left Gibbins lamenting the fate of hard-working academics whose best efforts to reveal the truths about the inner workings of political institutions have often been met with either stony silence or haughty dismissal by those who temporarily wield power within these institutions. Gibbins concluded his study, which confirmed Cairns' findings and reaffirmed the need for electoral system change, by stating, "Electoral reform with respect to the House of Commons is not going to happen. Not now. Not soon. Not ever."

This skepticism about the prospect of institutional change is echoed by the cynicism of the media in their coverage of the process with which we are now engaged. Despite the clear pledge of the current Prime Minister, the creation of this parliamentary committee, and the consultations that are currently under way, the jaundiced eye of political journalists and media pundits continues to produce expressions of disbelief that the prospects of change will ever be realized, or that the end result could be anything other than the preferred outcome of the current government, which would be the one, of course, that would redound to their electoral advantage. The skepticism and the cynicism continue, not unjustifiably, it should be said, given the long history of this issue.

After the passage of so much time, why the urgency for electoral reform now? There are a number of possible answers to this question, but I would suggest two.

First, there is the problem of systemic legitimacy, often referred to as a democratic deficit, that is becoming worse given the changing expectations of an increasingly diverse and highly educated population that is less disposed to a shrugging acceptance of "politics as usual". These citizens want a political system and a parliament that is more responsive to their views, that more closely aligns with their partisan preferences, and that more closely mirrors the composition of the society it purports to represent.

Second, there has emerged in Canada a relatively recent problem, at least in terms of its severity, that has been referred to as "policy lurch". I say it is relatively recent, because for decades prior to the 1990s Canadian governance was shaped by centrist, brokerage-style politics that moderated the policy shifts that are the normal expectation of a change in government. However, the more ideologically polarized environment that has emerged in Canada since that time has given rise to concerns about more severe instances of policy lurch that are evident in other first-past-the-post jurisdictions with more ideologically polarized party systems. Indeed, it has been cited as one of the main reasons for New Zealand's decision to change its electoral system.

To illustrate the problem, the current Trudeau government has spent much of its first year in office, and will no doubt do the same for a good part of its second year, undoing many of the changes introduced by the previous government, at which point in time they will begin taking steps to prepare the way for the next federal election campaign. Yet a relatively minor shift in votes of five or six percentage points in that election could result in a new government that engages in another round of policy lurch, undoing much of the undoing that this government has been doing. This kind of roundabout "now it's our turn" policy-making can hardly be thought of as beneficial for stable long-term governance that is built on a solid foundation of a reasonably broad societal consensus.

Though perhaps less dramatic in its processes, this mode of consensual governance is the demonstrably better course of action in terms of outcomes for economy and society, and frankly the most valuable contribution that can be made by politicians intent on practising the art of politics rather than engaging in the crass power game of one-upmanship and cyclical dominance.

Changing the voting system means changing the incentives that affect how people vote, that is, their decision-making in the realm of electoral politics. A more proportional system, by making every vote count, would remove fears of vote-splitting and reduce the pressure on voters to engage in strategic voting rather than choosing the candidate or party they most prefer. For party politicians, it would disincentivize knee-jerk adversarialism and reward more respectful cross-party relations and interparty co-operation.

● (1345)

This committee, this Parliament, and this government have a rare opportunity to create the conditions and institutional incentives to "do politics differently", a frequently voiced intention of new governments and newly minted MPs that inevitably frays and dissolves with the passage of time. This has not been due to the frailties of human nature or a sudden failure of resolve. It is the normal political behaviour encouraged by the design and functioning of our institutions, and particularly the electoral system.

I urge the committee to quell the doubts of the skeptics, to confound the many cynics, and to deliver on its appointed task of recommending to Parliament a new electoral system that will satisfy the five principles set down in the motion creating the committee. I wish you well in your difficult and important deliberations.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Professor.

We'll go now to Professor Dewar.

Mr. Kenneth Dewar (Professor, As an Individual): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you to the members of the committee for inviting me to speak this afternoon. I'm honoured to be here.

My presentation is in two parts: first, a question, and second, in the written part of my submission, I've expanded on the brief I submitted earlier. In both parts I will find myself departing from the consensus to which Professor Bickerton referred.

My question is the following: What is the problem that electoral reform is designed to fix? It is a basic question that comes before questions of detail and implementation. I expect you've heard it asked before as you've moved day after day across the country. Judging by the critics of our current voting system and by the terms of reference of this committee, the problem lies with democracy. The current single member plurality system is undemocratic, or at least seriously deficient in its democratic qualities. I want to suggest that our problem in Canada is not with our democracy but with our politics.

"What is the difference", you may ask, "aren't they related?" Yes, of course they are, and the origins of both can be traced to ancient Greece, but they are not the same thing. Democracy is a condition, a system, a state of things, whereas politics is an art, the "art of the possible", to quote a famous book by Canadian political scientist James Eayrs. It is a thing in itself, not a subsidiary aspect of something else, such as democracy. This is also true of liberty and representative government. They too are things in themselves and are not necessarily aspects of democracy.

Politics is not practised in all systems. It is not practised in dictatorships, for example, or tyrannies, or absolute monarchies, or oligarchies, because the essence of politics is that it accepts the existence of different truths and therefore of the need for conciliation and deliberation. It's not the best means of achieving a pure ideal untouched by compromise, if that's what you're after, nor of pursuing one's own interests regardless of the interests of others. It's messy, even grubby. Politics in this sense is at the foundation of our public life. Really, it's a precondition of democracy.

Somehow we have managed to lose sight of this in recent years. Instead of seeing politics as one of the most honourable of human activities, many people regard it as a necessary evil, or even an unnecessary evil. On the one hand, many seem to think of politics purely in terms of partisanship. On the other hand, many regard politics, politicians, and government as problems in themselves. They turn to various forms of anti-politics. People speak of "mere politics", implying that other activities, business being a prime example, are far more important. We see an extreme form of this in the current presidential election in the United States, where the rejection of politics and the civility it entails is made explicit at a high level in a way I've not seen on this continent in my lifetime.

Happily, civility has not disappeared from Canadian public life. I'm not sure why this is so. It may have something to do with culture. Canadians are so nice; when we are not apologizing to people, we are thanking them. It also has to do with our history. We never broke sharply with the mother country, as did the American colonies, creating something entirely new that thereafter could be used to justify various positions that claim to speak for the people. Instead, Canada evolved from colony to independent nationhood. Even this we did in so muddled a manner that even yet we continue to have ties in the form of a common monarch, whose children can evoke the kinds of sentiment that politicians could wish for, as we have seen in the past 10 days.

● (1350)

The continued existence of a monarch also means that in our democracy it is difficult to speak unreservedly of popular sovereignty. The crown is part of our Constitution. Arguably, in Canada, it would be more accurate to speak of parliamentary sovereignty rather than popular sovereignty, but this too has been limited since 1982 by the Charter of Rights and Freedoms. As Canadian historian William Kilbourn once wrote that Canadians are "a people of the law rather than the prophets."

Whatever the explanation, civility continues to be highly regarded in our public life, but we should not think we are immune to the American disease. Occasional popular eruptions and overheated expressions of partisanship attest to this. I'm not sure I have any remedy to offer—and we might return to it in the question period—but I think cynicism about politics is a greater threat than cynicism about democracy.

There are other avenues than the electoral system to pursue in search of remedies for the political malaise. An example is the approach to Senate reform recently put forward by former senators Michael Kirby and Hugh Segal in a report for the Public Policy Forum. Kirby and Segal seek to give new life to the original conception of the Senate as an institution of sober second thought that constrains the actions of a majoritarian government. At the same time, they would place limits on the constraints since the Senate is an unelected body.

One way or another, it seems to me that we need to find ways of reviving a genuine politics, a politics that is primarily concerned with negotiation, persuasion, and accommodation, and less with partisanship. Political parties at their best serve as intermediaries between the public and government, a form of civil society, educating and leading their members and, in turn, communicating the preferences and concerns of their members to the legislature and the wider public. Far from being mere weapons of partisanship, they are critical instruments for bringing together men and women of varying views, with the end of arriving at policies and decisions that benefit society as a whole.

Another way of putting all this is to suggest that the committee direct its attention away from the practical consequences of various possible reforms of the electoral system and towards the ends which reform is intended to achieve. The committee's mandate is to study viable alternate voting systems, but the five principles set out in the resolution passed by Parliament could also be directed to a study of political practice. At the very least, I hope you will consider the wider context within which the electoral system operates.

In the second part of my presentation, which as I mentioned earlier is an expansion of the brief I sent in, I set out three ways in which I think proportional representation might make things worse than the way things are now. However, I have to stop there, because my time is up.

Thank you.

●(1355)

The Chair: You have about a minute and a half. Do you want to elaborate briefly on those ways you alluded to?

Mr. Kenneth Dewar: Sure.

I'm a skeptic. I guess that's evident already. I'm both cautious and skeptical about electoral reform. At the centre of the debate about electoral reform are various kinds of proportional representation, particularly mixed member proportional representation.

First, it seems to me that proportional representation in whatever form encourages the proliferation of parties—not necessarily, but it makes it more likely than under the current system. Second, it makes of members of Parliament, at least certain members of Parliament, more representatives of their parties than of their constituents. Third, it reduces the tie which voters have to their district and which MPs have to their district.

It's commonly said, and my colleague has referred to it, that under the single plurality vote system, votes are wasted and votes don't count. I would just like to say that I've wasted my vote by this standard, that is, if my candidate hasn't won, for most of my adult life. I've never thought of it as wasted, because elections, in my view, are competitive struggles for power. That doesn't make them horse races, but it does mean that people compete with each other for the support of their electors in a particular community.

The Chair: Thank you, Professor.

I think we have a lot of food for thought today, and two fairly philosophical presentations. I'm sure there will be many questions to probe the essence of your respective points of view.

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

Mr. Matt DeCourcey (Fredericton, Lib.): Thank you, everyone, for being here. It's a pleasure to be recharged and joining all my colleagues around the table in Atlantic Canada and everybody here in my corner of the country. What a wonderful view we have. It's certainly the best room that we've sat in over the course of these three weeks. I also note the presence of some fellow alumni of Mount Saint Vincent University here today.

Thank you all for being here.

Professor Bickerton, you not so subtly suggested to us that now is the time to move ahead with electoral reform, to propose a system and approach that meets the five principles laid out in our mandate. If you'll allow me to put you on the spot, what system, in your mind, might that be?

●(1400)

Mr. James Bickerton: My personal preference is MMP. I think it's worked very well in other jurisdictions like Germany, Scotland, and New Zealand. I think it offers Canada both the benefits of first past the post and what we're lacking right now, which is a more proportional system. I think there are various things you can do with MMP to refine it to cater to Canada's specific circumstances, but if it were up to me, I would probably move in that direction. Most of the special commissions on electoral reform have ended up there in the end.

Mr. Matt DeCourcey: In your mind, what might that look like in Atlantic Canada? What we've received as advice is to look at an MMP system almost as 10 different provincial systems of some form of proportionality. That's for any form of PR. What might that look like in a region that has a smaller population?

Mr. James Bickerton: Let's take Nova Scotia as an example. I would think that it would form one region, so we would have a reduced number of single member seats. Instead of two seats for Cape Breton, perhaps there would be one MP representing Cape Breton in a single member constituency. As for seats, you would use the remainder of the seats for Nova Scotia as top-up seats, and the MPs would be Nova Scotia MPs representing the region of Nova Scotia. That would allow for proportionality in the end.

Mr. Matt DeCourcey: Would you see that seat in Cape Breton, those votes, contributing towards the total proportionality, and then a top-up member would still have—

Mr. James Bickerton: There would be two. In the MMP system you have two votes, so one would be for your local representative and one would be for a regional MP.

Mr. Matt DeCourcey: We had a presentation in Edmonton a few weeks ago on a system called dual member proportional, whereby you would effectively cut the number of seats in half—you would double them—so contiguous ridings would turn into one larger riding and you would vote for a party that would run one or two candidates. The candidate from the party with the most votes in that riding would get selected, and then the other seat in various districts would be topped up based on party vote.

The presentation took Atlantic Canada as one whole region. Do you think that sort of approach would be palatable?

Mr. James Bickerton: I'm not sure Atlantic Canadians would be very happy about that approach. It sounds like something that was devised elsewhere.

Mr. Matt DeCourcey: That was my initial reaction as well.

Mr. James Bickerton: Right. I think you'd encounter quite a bit of resistance to that in Atlantic Canada. Atlantic Canada is a very artificial construction, remember. It doesn't really exist as a region, the Maritimes perhaps more so; at least there's historical resonance for that identity. But I think provincial identities are so strong that it would be difficult to erase them when thinking about regional representation. I think it's possible to do it without resorting to lumping all Atlantic Canadians together into one region.

I would be happy with any system that produced greater proportionality of result, but I don't think you need to resort to this particular device.

Mr. Matt DeCourcey: Are you an advocate for an open or closed list?

Mr. James Bickerton: I'm an advocate for an open list. I think there's no reason not to allow voters to choose between party candidates. Some think that this would generate competition within political parties between their candidates. Yes, it would, but from a voter perspective and from a representation perspective, I don't think that would be a bad thing.

Mr. Matt DeCourcey: Great.

The Chair: Thanks very much.

We'll go to Mr. Richards.

Mr. Blake Richards (Banff—Airdrie, CPC): I appreciate your both being here. It was a very thoughtful, engaging, and interesting presentation, so thank you for that.

I have a couple of questions. The first one is for both of you.

I think it was you, Professor Bickerton, who mentioned that one thing that often leads to a disengagement in politics or in voting is cynicism about politicians and the political process in general. It's one of those things. This is a very important decision, obviously, that affects very fundamental aspects of our democracy. I think that citizens would expect that this is something that isn't going to be decided just by politicians or political parties. When things like that happen, when we proceed to make decisions such as this one without proper engagement or consultation, it feeds that cynicism. What are your thoughts on that?

I and others in the official opposition have called for a referendum before any changes are made. I would love to hear your thoughts on whether you think some kind of a broader consultation with the public, including a referendum, would be advisable prior to undertaking a significant reform such as this one.

I would love to hear both of your comments.

●(1405)

Mr. Kenneth Dewar: I'm actually not sure that a referendum is necessary on this issue.

I noted that one of your previous witnesses argued—assuming there was a new system proposed by this committee—that since something like MMP would alter, as I understood him, the way in which the Governor General would receive advice about forming a government, it would touch on the Constitution and that therefore this is in fact a constitutional issue.

Although he was making this argument—I'm embarrassed to say that I don't remember his name—he wasn't concluding from it that there needed to be a referendum. He was concluding, on the contrary, that there ought to be an election. If this were referred back to the House and the government were to take up whatever the recommendation was, it would be an occasion for further debate in an election rather than a referendum.

It was interesting to me, though.... Again, I think this is a question that is within the jurisdiction of Parliament to come up with. Here I'm perhaps going beyond my expertise, but we have changed the electoral system in the past. We have introduced the secret ballot. We have widened the franchise. We have done those kinds of things, and we've done them by acts of Parliament.

Mr. James Bickerton: From my point of view, I'm not in favour of a referendum. I'm not really big on plebiscitarian forms of democracy, to be honest. I wasn't even in favour of the referendum on the Charlottetown accord, although I realize that's probably not a popular position now.

We have a representative democracy. I think most people, whether they always trust their representatives or not, realize these are very complex public policy issues and they can be quite highly technical, too. To expect that voters would be able to take the time to school themselves, educate themselves on these issues sufficiently to render judgment, is asking too much of them, I think.

It's not a question of changing the Constitution. As long as whatever system you come up with or recommend maintains representation by population, then I think it's incumbent on our representatives to do their best job, to try not just to maintain a representative democracy but to improve the quality of it to these kinds of measures that are being proposed.

I'm not in favour of a referendum on this issue. I think a referendum has been used and can be used to block change mainly because people, when they are unsure or when they feel they don't have sufficient knowledge to make a judgment, will lean toward voting no, and I think that's a reasonable position for them to take. But I don't think any campaign that would be launched to educate the broad public on these issues would be successful in the end.

I teach students about this. They are in my classroom. They are supposed to be interested in these issues, and their eyes start to glaze over after I start talking about it.

●(1410)

The Chair: You're making us feel bad here. We're doing some important work, we thought.

We'll have to stop there, and we'll go to Mr. Cullen.

Mr. Nathan Cullen (Skeena—Bulkley Valley, NDP): My eyes didn't glaze over once throughout the entire testimony, so we're doing well today.

I want to step into one thing, Professor Bickerton. You join a long list of very esteemed academics and experts on this, calling for change that improves the connection between what voters want and what they get. I don't want to oversimplify your testimony.

One of the things you talked about was that you illuminated us on the what, in answer to my colleague's question: a proportional system. In response to the how, as was just asked by my Conservative colleagues, you talked about a "sufficiently broad agreement". I think those are the words you maybe used.

I'll reading a quote from Mr. Mayrand, who runs our elections right now, as to how we validate whatever this committee comes up with and recommends to the government. He said recently:

> Not a single government, whatever the majority is, should be able to unilaterally change the rules of election. Changing the rules of that competition among them should require a broad consensus—the broadest possible.

By unilateral, I assume he means single party or majority party, and that one of the tests for what we get done is that it be accepted by more than one party, through the House, through the process we're going through right now. I don't want to put words in your mouth. Is that fair?

Mr. James Bickerton: I don't think that's unfair, and I would agree. I don't think this is the kind of change that you would want to proceed with without getting some consensus among the—

Mr. Nathan Cullen: Why not?

Mr. James Bickerton: I think it's one thing to include it in a party platform in an election campaign—and politicians will always claim they have a mandate to do whatever they have in their platform—but voting behaviour studies and electoral studies continually show that, when people vote, most of the time they are not aware of most of what's in a party's platform. So it's not quite kosher to claim a mandate for everything that's in your platform and proceed in that fashion.

At the same time, consensus is not unanimity, as the Supreme Court has very nicely pointed out on a couple of occasions. I think you can still generate a fairly broad consensus now that we no longer have just a two party system. I think it was very difficult when there were only two parties.

Mr. Nathan Cullen: If I'm getting your level of legitimacy right, it doesn't need to be a consensus of every single vote in Parliament, but a broad consensus.

Mr. James Bickerton: That would be unanimity, wouldn't it?

Mr. Nathan Cullen: Wouldn't it, though? Okay.

You used a phrase, and I'm not sure I caught it right, that the bias in the Westminister model is an exaggerated executive dominance.

Mr. James Bickerton: Yes.

Mr. Nathan Cullen: What do you mean?

Mr. James Bickerton: One of the big criticisms of Canadian government, as Professor Savoie and others have pointed out, is the tendency for the Prime Minister and the Prime Minister's Office to essentially wield all the levers of power, with very little check on how they do so.

Mr. Nathan Cullen: Has that had much difference between the two parties that have run this country?

Mr. James Bickerton: No. I think both.... That's been very well illustrated since at least the time of Pierre Trudeau.

Professor Russell published a book called, *Two Cheers for Minority Government*. He pointed out that it's not a bad thing to have minority governments in Canada, because there is a need to seek a broader consensus before moving ahead with legislation, to get the support of at least one other party.

I would think there would be a greater check on executive dominance, in other words prime ministerial dominance, if we had sort of permanent minorities.

Mr. Nathan Cullen: So it's not just that check on the power—we know what power, particularly if it's in large doses, does to people over time—but also on the policies. We had Mr. Broadbent testify earlier at this committee about a sequence he had with the senior Mr. Trudeau, who'd won a majority but virtually no seats from the west. Mr. Trudeau was looking to bring in an energy policy, yet with no significant input from western Canada, and tried to bring Mr. Broadbent and some others into that cabinet to balance out the enactment of the policy that became the national energy program, which, and I don't want to exaggerate, didn't land very well. It was not received well both in substance and in politics at the time.

Mr. Dewar, we've heard testimony from countries that use proportional systems. We asked questions about the two types of MPs and about voter dissatisfaction. We heard very strong evidence from Irish, German and New Zealand officials that this was not the case, and that under the system Mr. Bickerton and others have advocated, for about three-quarters of Parliament there remains a direct geographical link. You suggested that there are worries about that. Our system right now does a great job on geography but not much else. It really emphasizes geography, solely almost.

Would a mixed system alleviate some of those concerns, as has been the experience in countries that have chosen a hybrid type of voting system to increase proportionality but not lose the local links?

● (1415)

Mr. Kenneth Dewar: Perhaps so. I don't think, however, that the only thing our system does now is address geography. On the question you've just been discussing about executive power, there's too much executive power and then there's good executive power.

Mr. Nathan Cullen: It depends on your point of view, I imagine.

Mr. Kenneth Dewar: That's right.

Mr. Nathan Cullen: It depends on whether you're currently the executive.

Mr. Kenneth Dewar: I guess I would say that one of the strengths of the current system.... You have these five criteria, five principles, and they don't all point in one direction, do they? There are trade-offs and balances. It seems to me that one of the things our current system does offer is not only geographical representation but also a measure of stability and a measure of visibility between the voters and the government. Proportional representation is especially concerned with voters and members. Voters elect members, and the leaders of the parties that the members represent get together and they negotiate to form a government. Well, in this current system, there's a greater visibility between what voters have voted for and the government that ends up being in power.

The Chair: Thanks very much.

We'll go to Ms. May, please.

Ms. Elizabeth May (Saanich—Gulf Islands, GP): This has been a really superb set of evidence. I want to thank both of you for being here.

Mr. Dewar, in terms of your biography, were you a professor at any point in your life? I know you are appearing as an individual, but I don't know enough about your background.

Mr. Kenneth Dewar: I was a professor for most of my life, except for a half dozen years when I owned a bookstore.

Ms. Elizabeth May: Okay. Well, those are both very worthy things to do.

Mr. Kenneth Dewar: That's right. I was at various places, but I was at Mount Saint Vincent for almost 30 years before I retired.

Ms. Elizabeth May: I'm fond of Mount Saint Vincent for many reasons, particularly for my friendship with Margaret Fulton.

I'm a big fan of consensus, as everyone around here knows. I'm like a broken record on how consensus decision-making could improve politics and democracy in Parliament. I'm wondering if I can't achieve consensus now, in my five minutes, between Professor Bickerton and Professor Dewar.

You said in your testimony, Professor Dewar, if I have this right, that politics is better with more accommodation and less partisanship. I'm firmly of the belief, as Professor Bickerton put forward from Alan Cairns' article, that first past the post encourages the worst form of behaviour from people in politics. I think all parliamentarians, or actually the ones just around this table, are essentially really good people, "people people", and they want to work for our communities. But first past the post creates, as Professor Bickerton mentioned, "perverse partisan incentives to double down".

Perhaps, Professor Bickerton, if you could attempt to persuade Professor Dewar that we're right—

Voices: Oh, oh!

Ms. Elizabeth May: —I will back off and cheer from the sidelines.

Partisan politics under first past the post is what creates the incentive for dog whistle politics, for wedge issues, instead of getting together and fixing things and working together, which is, I think, what Canadians want.

Over to you, Professor Bickerton. Give it your best shot.

Voices: Oh, oh!

● (1420)

Mr. James Bickerton: I didn't expect this, Ken.

Voices: Oh, oh!

Mr. James Bickerton: Well, I don't know; he heard my presentation. I suppose we could give your time over to how he would respond to my presentation.

I don't want to put age into the question here, but in my experience, the generation that came just before me is much more likely to be supportive of retaining the current system, and I think for very good reasons. They had a lot of life experience under that system, went through a lot of traumatic global events, and Canada actually fared very well in the end as a result of that. I think it would be the natural response to say that it really isn't broken, so why are we trying to fix something that isn't broken? That's a simplification of what Dr. Dewar was saying, but I think it is probably the commonly held perception by that generation.

I just think the polity has changed. The polity has changed quite dramatically. It's less deferential than it used to be and it's more demanding in terms of wanting politics to be done differently. I know that Professor Dewar said that we can change politics without changing the electoral system, but I'm neo-institutionalist in my approach. I believe that institutions shape political behaviour. I think we need to redesign our institutions if we want to redesign our political behaviour.

Ms. Elizabeth May: Are you persuaded?

Mr. Kenneth Dewar: I don't want to surprise you, but no.

I don't really want to talk about Senate reform, but there are other institutional reforms that could be made that would mitigate extreme partisanship. We won't get rid of partisanship no matter what system one has. That's what parties are about. They're about standing up for their own positions.

Tom Axworthy, who I believe testified before this committee, wrote a long paper about parliamentary reform for the Centre for the Study of Democracy and Diversity at Queen's University. It's about the House of Commons as well as the Senate. It's really an interesting document, because it extends beyond the walls of Parliament. He suggests, for example, that changes could be made in the committee system that perhaps would give greater power to chairs of committees—

Mr. Nathan Cullen: That's a terrible idea.

Voices: Oh, oh!

Mr. Kenneth Dewar: —and reduce the powers of vice-chairs.

I don't think the electoral system is the only way in to addressing problems of partisanship. I mean, it's interesting, isn't it? Really, my generation experienced a particular history, and there has been a very unsettled history in the last quarter century. It's very unsettled now. A famous political philosopher, Hannah Arendt, said that no politics is violence, or violence is no politics; it's not the extension of politics by other means.

I just lost my train of thought.

The Chair: I don't want to accumulate too much power in the position of the chair and give rise to an imperial chairmanship, but we'll go now to Ms. Sahota.

Ms. Ruby Sahota (Brampton North, Lib.): I guess my question is along those lines, so you'll probably be able to sort through what you were thinking about.

What this committee is trying to do is provide Canadians with a system that has more benefits than flaws. You've kind of left us with a little bit of a cliffhanger, Professor Dewar, by saying that you weren't able to completely address the second part of your position.

One of the flaws with this system could be, as Professor Bickerton was saying, the undoing of undoing that occurs from government to government. Also, what we commonly hear from a lot of the open microphone sessions and people in our town halls is that their votes don't count, that the person they've been voting for their whole life never gets elected, or that they don't see themselves represented in the parties that are in power. That is probably the most common.

Then we also hear that coalition governments create better policies because of the collaborative atmosphere they create, which reduces the partisanship.

Could you comment on those things we're hearing, what your viewpoint is on that, and what the disadvantages or benefits from changing would be?

● (1425)

Mr. Kenneth Dewar: Is it unfair of me to use that question to finish the point I was going to make? I think it addresses the—

The Chair: That's why I explained at the beginning that it's never too late to jump in.

Mr. Kenneth Dewar: I think I see the unsettlement that is very apparent in different parts of the world in the last five to 10 years as being in a longer period of unsettlement. That is, from the fall of the Berlin Wall and the collapse of the Soviet Union and the rise of neo-liberalism in the 1980s and into the 1990s, the traditional ideologies have become unstable, and there's a different discourse now. People might speak about class more than they did, but they don't speak about class. They speak about death, and they're concerned about gender and— There are all these other issues that have fed in that don't, as I understand them, fit into the kinds of boundaries of the politics of before, which defined the formation of government, and so on, in my time. If that means we are in a new era, and that's going to go on, then perhaps I should just give up and....

I think that's something that's actually going to settle out. Again, I think that with there being balances and trade-offs, coalition governments are the product of conciliation and accommodation, on the face of it. But coalition governments are also often sustained by a small party that represents relatively few voters, and it holds the balance of power. Then there's another election, and there's a slight adjustment of the numbers of votes, and so on, and who forms the government again maybe comes down to this small party. Maybe the government doesn't change very much.

There's a stability of politics. I know we're not talking about an Israeli system of voting, but Israel has had the same people in power for decades. I think the same can be said about Japan, though this borders on my knowledge. Also, all of that takes place behind closed doors.

It's true that, if you happen to vote for the Green Party, proportional representation will result in more than one member of Parliament being elected to the Greens. If we could be confident that every one of them would be as reasoned and balanced as Elizabeth May, that alone might be enough to switch my position. However, I don't think one can count on that. As I say, voters who vote for minority parties will be happier, but the end result of who forms the government and how it's maintained isn't necessarily going to be very clear to those voters.

The Chair: You have time for one last comment.

Ms. Ruby Sahota: That's okay.

The Chair: We'll go to Mr. Nater, please.

Mr. John Nater (Perth—Wellington, CPC): First, I do empathize with Professor Bickerton that his students' eyes glazed over. When I taught the introduction to political science course at King's University College, my students' eyes also glazed over. The way I got around that was by ordering pizza based on an electoral system. The first-past-the-post system resulted in pepperoni pizza. We tried single transferable vote on the B.C. model, but we just ran out of class time to actually order the pizza.

I kid you not. It was a lot of fun.

A voice: Did you try MMP?

Mr. John Nater: We didn't try MMP. We just did the counting from it. We did have two days of pizza ordering based on an electoral system, so I do empathize with that.

I want to start with you, Professor Dewar, and some of the comments you made toward the end of your presentation on some of the drawbacks of an alternative system. You mentioned the proliferation of political parties, the challenge of MPs becoming representatives of parties rather than regional, and the reduction of ties to the riding.

We've had a fair bit of testimony on the reduction of ties. I'm not going to focus on that one. I'll focus on those two comments you made. On the proliferation of political parties, you were touching on that a little bit in response to Madam Sahota. I was wondering if you could expand on that, the proliferation of the party going beyond....

We know Duverger's law, how that typically says first past the post...small numbers...would see an increase.... How would that affect our political system? How would that affect our democracy, having a number of new parties? Some of them potentially might be fringe parties. I'm not talking about the Greens or the NDP, because I don't consider them fringe parties, but fringe parties beyond that would turn to the extreme. How would that affect that?

● (1430)

Mr. Kenneth Dewar: Jim would know better than I, but I think in the first election in New Zealand after proportional representation was introduced, there were 34 parties that ran—something like that —but not all of them achieved membership.

It isn't that one day we change and then the next day it's all going to change. Maybe I'm exaggerating my worries, but I think if I can put it another way, our experience with parties historically has been that they have performed nationalizing roles. I know not everybody agrees with that.

I think you had Kenneth Carty here early in your meetings, who argued this. I think also that one can broaden it, and I know that brokerage parties are supposed to be bad things—and I've criticized them myself—but brokerage parties have the merit of being open and bringing people together. I especially appreciate that today, when there are all sorts of other forces in society that are causing fragmentation, the Internet being the obvious one. Nobody reads the same newspaper anymore, and actually that's a good thing today in Halifax, because nobody's reading.... There are online blogs and various sources of news, where one reads for confirmation. So one reads and gets one's point of view confirmed, and I think that would aid this proliferation of parties I'm talking about.

Mr. John Nater: The *National Post* this morning had an article about the Pirate Party potentially being in a position to win the election in Iceland. That's an interesting situation, probably the definition of where a fringe party might be in a position to do that.

I want to follow up a little bit on your second point about political parties. As we know, very few Canadians are actually members of political parties. There's a small minority, I know, from running for my nomination. We're talking about maybe 3% of the population.

Is there a challenge to the power being given to political parties in a sense? We talk about the dominance of the executive, as Professor Bickerton mentioned, but is there a challenge to it? Are we going to have a dominance of the political party, where there is even less of a democratic linkage in terms of that linkage to the voter, where people become representatives of the political party? Are we going to see a situation where people are even more likely to toe the party line than we see now in the Westminster system?

Mr. Kenneth Dewar: Well, again, I wish I could be more definite in my answers to questions.

I think there's a risk of that. Maybe I'm exaggerating it. Maybe that wouldn't happen. I'm sorry, I don't have anything more to say on that.

The Chair: Thank you. The time is up anyway.

We'll go to Mr. Aldag.

Mr. John Aldag (Cloverdale—Langley City, Lib.): Professor Bickerton, I just want some clarification on your opening comments. I heard you mention "seat thresholds", but I didn't hear any details. I wonder if you have any thoughts on the specifics. We've heard different evidence in this area. I don't know if what you're talking about is the same as vote thresholds.

● (1435)

Mr. James Bickerton: Yes, I'm sorry, that's what I meant. It's the same thing.

Mr. John Aldag: We've heard anything from 2% or 3% to 15%. In fact 5% often comes up as a threshold. Where do you sit on that?

Mr. James Bickerton: Based on my understanding of the use of vote thresholds elsewhere, 3% to 5% would seem to be reasonable.

In terms of the concern about the proliferation of political parties, it turns out that it's very difficult for a political party to get 3% to 5% of a national vote. It's extremely difficult with first past the post, but it's very difficult nonetheless. Although 34 parties jumped in on the first opportunity in New Zealand, only a small number of those actually exceeded the threshold and gained representation in the New Zealand Parliament, one of them being the Maori Party. A certain number of seats had been guaranteed to the indigenous people, so they automatically had a new party there.

When we look at more reasonable examples, in northern Europe, for instance, Germany has only four parties represented. They have fewer parties represented in the Bundestag than we do in our Parliament, and they use MMP. The same can be said for the Scandinavian countries, with only a limited number of parties. There isn't a problem with the proliferation of parties if you have a reasonable vote threshold, which eliminates a lot of these tiny extremist parties that you find in Israel, for example, which would be an absolutely awful example for Canada to point to. There is absolutely no possibility that we would ever have Israel's model of one constituency for the whole country, no vote threshold, and of course just the social and cultural context that's so dramatically different there.

It just makes no sense to me whatsoever to point to those examples.

Mr. John Aldag: Thank you. I just wanted to clarify that piece.

I appreciated the testimony from both of you. I'll move to Professor Dewar now.

I had a look at your written brief, and you settle—I don't know if it's a soft landing—on the idea of maintaining a majoritarian system, either the current first past the post or some form of ranked ballot. If we stay with the existing system, one of the big flaws that comes up always is false majorities.

I'd like to hear your thoughts on how real a situation you see that being and how much of a flaw it is in our current process. Would something like ranked ballot be sufficient to overcome that?

Mr. Kenneth Dewar: A ranked ballot would be sufficient to overcome that just because of the way it works.

Mr. John Aldag: On the idea of false majorities, how concerned should we be?

Mr. Kenneth Dewar: Well, I don't know; surely it's implicit in what I've been saying that false majorities don't concern me. How many majority governments have we had in the history of Canada? Jim could probably have it at his fingertips more than I could, but probably in 1958, and maybe in one other—

A voice: In 1984.

Mr. Kenneth Dewar: —1984—a majority of the electorate voted for the government that actually was formed. I think that's the result of a system that otherwise works quite well. It produces an accountable government, because you can blame the government that's done something and then throw the beggars out, in theory.

Mr. John Aldag: Okay. That's fine. I just wanted your thoughts on that.

I'll throw this out to both of you. In terms of some of the other reforms that could be made, we have heard about things like mandatory voting. Do you have any comments you'd like to offer on the question of mandatory voting in the Canadian context?

Mr. James Bickerton: I'm not in favour of it in the Canadian context. The only other example I'm familiar with is Australia. I'm sure that if we had mandatory voting, Canadians would, like Australians, get used to voting as not just a duty but the law. Of course, you can construct it so that fines for non-compliance are relatively minor, or you can escape it with a reasonable reason for not being able to vote. You can set it up so that it's not too onerous on people.

Honestly, I haven't given mandatory voting a lot of thought, because I've never considered it to be something that would be acceptable in Canadian polity. You'd have to prepare the way for it, I think.

● (1440)

Mr. John Aldag: Professor Dewar, do you have any comments?

The Chair: Very briefly, if you could.

Mr. Kenneth Dewar: I share Jim's response to that question. It would only be a good thing if you could be sure that being forced to vote by the law leads to engagement. If that's true, then it might have benefits, but I don't think that's true. I think it might lead in the other direction, to being resentful of it. Really, it kind of undercuts the idea of voting, doesn't it? If you're engaged with the public affairs of your community and your country, then you vote. You voluntarily do it.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. MacGregor, welcome to the committee. We're pleased to have you here today.

Mr. Alistair MacGregor (Cowichan—Malahat—Langford, NDP): Thank you very much, Chair.

The Chair: I hope you find it interesting.

Mr. Alistair MacGregor: Professor Dewar, I want to start with you. I want to go over one of the main criticisms of the current system we employ, and that's regionalism. I'm a first-time member of Parliament. Now that I've escaped the confines of my mountain kingdom in British Columbia and come here, I've really come to understand and appreciate the regional differences. I think everyone in every party can appreciate that MPs, even if they're in the same party, if they're from different regions can sometimes have different views, and appreciate how important it is to have those different regional voices.

I'm wondering if you could give your thoughts on the regional problem of our current system. What do we say to progressives in Alberta, or to the 38% of people who didn't vote Liberal here in Nova Scotia? Those voices seem to be lacking, and we have a system that kind of perpetuates that.

Have you ever given any thought to how that could be fixed, even though you are a fan of our current system?

Mr. Kenneth Dewar: Well, I think when I suggest, at least in my understanding of the point, that parties that have performed a nationalizing function, it's that they have actually attempted to reach.... It hasn't always worked, clearly. Often it has been the case

that parties have depended on overwhelming support from one region and less from another, or none from another. But the party, as a party, aims to set roots down across the country, in all regions of the country, and seeks to bring the representatives of those regions together.

The fact that all of the seats went Liberal in this region in the last election, which just boggled my mind on election night, is a sign of something. I think what the losing parties might think about is what that's a sign of rather than complaining that they received a minority of votes and were unrepresented.

Mr. Alistair MacGregor: Moving on to the stability part of it, you mentioned that first past the post leads to stable governments. Just going over a few of the stats, Canada has had 23 elections since World War II, but if you look at some proportional representation countries, Germany has had 18, Ireland 20, and Sweden 21.

I remember the time between 2004 and 2011, and that was not a stable time in Canada. Actually, in my former job I worked for an MP. Many days I'd come to work and ask myself if that was the day we'd be going to the polls. There was a lot of playing chicken with each other.

I'm wondering if you could comment on that period. It seems to me that if we had parties where you could have that participation in cabinet, because we have such a powerful executive, then perhaps that might mitigate the instability that we did have during that period.

Mr. Kenneth Dewar: Possibly, I'm running out of steam.

● (1445)

Mr. James Bickerton: You should direct some questions towards me.

Mr. Kenneth Dewar: I'll let you answer it then, Jim.

Mr. Alistair MacGregor: I do have one question for Professor Bickerton at the end.

Mr. Kenneth Dewar: Some of our best governments have been minority governments; there's no doubt about that. I would point to successive Liberal governments in the 1960s to whom we owe many things that many Canadians regard as central to a Canadian identity. That's great. I'm not going to put myself in the position of opposing that. But that also happened because there was some agreement between an opposition party and the governing party.

Mr. Alistair MacGregor: Professor Bickerton, in your opening statement you were talking about policy lurch. Coincidentally, some of us during breakfast today were talking about defence procurement and how obtaining the equipment necessary for our military to function properly is often a lot longer than an electoral cycle, but governments often want to put their own stamp on policy directions. We are often finding ourselves unravelling the previous government's policies, which might take a year or two, and then really putting our own policies in just in time for an election. I was wondering if you could expand a little bit about that particular area.

Mr. James Bickerton: Yes. I think that the problem is particularly acute in our system where we have one-party majority governments that can be changed very easily with just a few percentage points change in the popular vote. It can result in this problem because many policies, not just military procurement, require a longer time horizon than a single electoral cycle. If you have coalition governments with more than one party involved, you're not as likely to get these kinds of dramatic changes as the result of a few points shifting, which is usually the way it is, actually. An election usually turns out to ride on a very small percentage change in the popular vote. As a result you have more stable long-term policies because there has to be more of a consensus on those policies. I think that's true of moving toward a proportional system.

I'd just like to suggest an answer to Ken's remark asking what the Liberal monopoly on seats in Atlantic Canada says. I think his point was that it's a message to the other parties that there's something wrong. I would, in fact, say that it's a perfect example of the distortions that our current electoral system produced, because the outcome was clearly at least partially due to strategic voting, the belief people had that they had to move strongly to one alternative to the current government to ensure that the current government was defeated. That's what our electoral system does. There were a number of excellent MPs who were very popular in their ridings who were pushed aside by that, and people did not feel good about that, people who I've talked to. They felt they had to do it, and it was the electoral system that made them do it.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Go ahead, Monsieur Rayes.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Alain Rayes (Richmond—Arthabaska, CPC): Good afternoon. Thank you for being here with us.

Mr. Bickerton, I have a question for you. My colleague Blake Richards asked if you were in favour of consulting the entire population through a referendum if the government decides to change the voting system. Going by your answer, I think you feel that would not really be necessary, because the government and Parliament represent the population.

I'd like a small clarification. You say the government represents the population very well, but in your presentation you said that we should have a proportional voting system that would represent citizens' opinions better. It seems to me there is a contradiction there.

The current government formed a majority government, as we all know, with 39.5% of the vote. This same government has the power to unilaterally change a voting system it deems unrepresentative.

Could you tell us a bit more about this? Did I misunderstand your answer?

● (1450)

[*English*]

Mr. James Bickerton: There maybe was a bit of a misunderstanding. I don't think I said that a government is representative of a population. I said I believe in representative democracy, which is quite different.

My point was that we elect representatives and we entrust them to a certain extent to make these complex decisions for us, to gather all the evidence they need to gather, and the testimony we're hearing today is an example. Then, in this case, it's to come to some kind of consensus about what kind of a change would be good, even beyond a single party or a single government in terms of making a change of this order.

However, it's not the same as a referendum on whether to secede from Canada. For instance, clearly for a decision of that magnitude, you must consult the population in a referendum to get a yes or a no vote. Changing the electoral system, the mechanism by which we elect our representatives, is not a decision of that order.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Alain Rayes: Thank you very much.

When we were in Quebec, my colleague Mr. DeCourcey put a question to a Laval University political science professor. Correct me if I am wrong, but I believe he asked him whether he felt there should be a public referendum to establish a certain consensus. Would this compromise be acceptable to you, would this make changing the voting system conceivable for you?

Is my question clear?

[*English*]

Mr. James Bickerton: I'm not sure. Are you asking me if a referendum would be a way to generate consensus or to measure consensus? Is that the question?

[*Translation*]

Mr. Alain Rayes: In order to obtain a consensus on the voting system proposed to the Canadian population, should we hold a referendum? Could that option be of interest?

[*English*]

Mr. James Bickerton: No.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Alain Rayes: No.

[*English*]

Mr. James Bickerton: I think for the reasons I stated already, the consensus that I think is needed is some consensus among the political parties. Unanimity...certainly we don't have to impose that rule, but broader than a single party or a single government.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Alain Rayes: Suppose a referendum were needed to obtain the support of another political party for the government decision. Let's suppose there was no consensus and that no other party accepted the government's proposal. That could happen.

[*English*]

Mr. James Bickerton: Ah, I'm sorry. I see what you mean now.

If the government attempted to impose its solution without the agreement of any other parties, then that government should go to a referendum to get the public's approval. Is that what you're saying?

Mr. Alain Rayes: That's it.

Mr. James Bickerton: I think since I've already said that a single party government should not impose its will on everybody else, in this instance, it does logically push me toward the direction that they should go to a referendum if no other party can agree with their solution.

Mr. Alain Rayes: Thank you.

The Chair: Fifteen seconds.

Mr. Alain Rayes: My next question is addressed to either of you.

People often tell us that we have to listen to them, that their opinion is important and that being able to express their opinion only once every four years is not enough.

Before this meeting started, I took a little Facebook poll. Our minister is very fond of social networks. Many of you quote people who put questions to you on Twitter.

In less than an hour, 45% to 55% of people indicated that they would like to see the voting system changed. I want to understand clearly. A little more than 50% of people want to see the system changed.

At the same time, over 86% of those polled said that they want an opportunity to have their say about the voting system to be considered. You can feel the skepticism out there. People wonder why they should give an opinion if they don't know what model is being considered. That seems to be the general feeling out there among citizens.

The Chair: That was more of a comment, so we'll stop there and go to Ms. Romanado.

Mrs. Sherry Romanado (Longueuil—Charles-LeMoyne, Lib.): As a good Canadian, I will say thank you to everyone here today and apologize for my tardiness. With this many meetings in this many cities, I didn't realize which floor this meeting was on.

That being said, it was interesting to have two conflicting panellists today, and when I say "conflicting", that's not in a bad way. We've heard a lot about various systems and the magical powers they have, that they will solve all evil on earth, and so on and so forth.

I'm also of the mindset that our electoral system is an ecosystem. There are many parts to it, and it's not necessarily the way we vote that is going to fix everything. There are tactics we can develop. There are things we can implement to address, say, the tone in the House.

We talked a little bit about how we can change the committee structure to include more different voices. We talked a little bit about mandatory voting. And we heard a little bit about cynicism. I'll premise this by saying that a lot of people are surprised to know that

after these meetings, most of this committee—in fact all of the committee—usually sits down and has a debriefing, and we laugh and we joke around. We actually do get along.

One thing we did notice is that, if there is a political will to change something, it's not necessarily an electoral system that will address some of the problems. For instance, let's say we want to increase the engagement of women, of youth, of minorities in politics to run for office. I'm of the firm belief that people decide not to run for office not because of the fact they don't like the electoral system per se, but rather it is the job, the idea of the adversarial tone, the idea of your life being on the front page, the idea of the constant bickering.

I'll give you an example. There are 197 new MPs. I'm one of them. We decided, little backbenchers that we are, to change the tone of the House by one simple measure. We brought forward the idea to stop clapping during question period. We tried this in June. We decided we would not clap. We support our government, but we're not going to clap at the answer. On the first day everyone looked at us as if we were crazy. On the second day, they were all wondering what the Liberals were up to. On the third day, we saw that the tone in the House actually calmed down because the reaction on the other side was amplified because we weren't reacting, and it calmed the House down. There wasn't a change in the electoral system; it was a change in political will to do things differently.

My question is for the two of you. What can we be doing that is not necessarily a change in our electoral system but can address some of the issues we are facing, whether it be participation at the polls, running for office, changing the tone, or having a collaborative approach?

If you could elaborate, that would be great.

● (1455)

Mr. James Bickerton: I applaud you for your efforts to change the tone in the House. I think I need to remind you that you are in the first year of an electoral cycle and you are a brand new MP.

There have been changes attempted since the 1970s—or 1960s, if I go back that far—in the procedures of the House in order to try to alter in some way the political behaviour of MPs in the House. They always break down in the end. There was a concerted effort by the Paul Martin government, in fact, to do away with confidence votes except on certain items, and he took other measures as well to try to change the tone in the House. There were similar kinds of attempts—the bells crisis, I can think back to, in the Joe Clark and Pierre Trudeau days, and so on.

This is not something new. This has been around for decades and decades. I would think it's not just simply a matter that we can do better if only we have the will to do it. I'm sure that will be a factor, but unlike you, I believe that there is such a thing as institutional incentives to behaviour, and that institutions do ultimately shape behaviour. They don't determine it, but they shape it.

Minor reform to procedures in the House is not what's needed here. We need bigger change, and one of those bigger changes is electoral system reform. Unlike my colleague here, I actually think it will be easier to bring about than Senate reform, which was the alternative. He thought we should concentrate on Senate reform, but I think electoral system reform is actually within your power to change in a serious way. I'm not sure Senate reform is. We'll see how the current changes work out.

Based on many studies over a long period of time and a lot of experience that older parliamentarians could bring to this discussion too, we know it is always easier to get along in the early part of a new electoral cycle. As you go along the electoral cycle, things change fairly dramatically. I hope it doesn't happen, but I think it probably will.

●(1500)

The Chair: Thank you.

Please be very brief, Professor.

Mr. Kenneth Dewar: Okay.

I like your idea of the ecology of the electoral system. You won't be surprised to hear that I disagree with Jim, but I think there are other ways of going. I don't think it's just Senate reform. There's parliamentary committee reform.

If I may hark back to my position as a historian, there is teaching in the schools. There is the teaching of civics in the schools. There's an old book called *What Culture? What Heritage?* published about 50 years ago that I would suggest people pull off the shelf. It comes out of a nationalist era, but it's about teaching citizens in your classrooms, teaching your students as though they are going to be citizens, at least for part of the time that they spend in school.

The Chair: We've heard that a lot, actually, in our hearings.

Thank you so much to both of you for a very engaging discussion.

I mentioned this the other day when we were in another city. After 35 meetings you kind of figure you've heard it all, but every meeting in every part of the country brings some added value, and you certainly didn't disappoint in that respect today. I thank you very much for all the work you put into coming here and presenting to us.

We'll have a short break for five minutes, and then we'll greet our next panel.

●(1500)

———————— (Pause) ————————

●(1510)

The Chair: I call the meeting to order.

Welcome to our second panel.

We have with us, appearing as individuals, Mr. Matt Risser and Mr. Denis Falvey; and representing Democracy: Vox Populi, Christopher Majka, director.

Each witness will have five minutes, which will be followed by a round of questions in which every member has five minutes to engage with the witnesses.

We'll get right to it with Mr. Risser, please, for five minutes.

Mr. Matt Risser (As an Individual): For everyone's information, Denis and I are a bit of a double act. Between the two of us we'll only take five minutes, which I hope leaves more time for questions.

First of all, welcome to Halifax.

Thank you for agreeing to hear from us about single member district proportional representation, SMDPR, a made-for-Canada list PR system that changes as little as possible from first past the post.

The purpose of voting in Canada is to periodically transfer power from the people to their representatives, who then form the House of Commons and enact the laws under which we all must live. In this regard, the democratic equality of one person, one vote is a hollow phrase if it doesn't comprehend equal voice for votes in Parliament or equal transfers of power. Indeed, the lack of equal voice for votes constitutes a threat to the democratic principles of one person, one vote, majority rule, the rule of law, equality before the law, and the protection of minorities.

Although MPs advocate for all their constituents equally on local matters, each MP speaks with only one partisan voice in Parliament. Plurality rule at the riding level, which is inherent to first past the post, effectively silences any other partisan voices from their riding in Parliament. Across the country, more than half the partisan voices of the electorate are excluded in this way. This is the primary cause of our current system's acknowledged ills.

To take an example, in the 2015 federal election, about 30% of the electorate didn't vote, and 32% voted for losing candidates, all transferring no power. About 11% were surplus votes that winning candidates didn't require, transferring no useful power. The opposition was formed on a useful transfer of power from 9% of the electorate, and a strong majority government from 10%. In all, 81% of the electorate either did or could have stayed home, and the results would have been the same. Previous elections yielded comparable results.

Clearly, neither majority rule nor equal voice for equal votes exists in our current system. Since the plurality always wins now, and most votes don't count, one simple way to ensure that most votes count is for the plurality to not always win. After all, if plurality rule is the problem, then fixing it alone is at least an obvious solution to investigate. Recognizing that the only things that electoral reform can change are the ballot, the riding boundaries, the number and nature of MPs, and the way the vote is counted, SMDPR changes only the way the vote is counted.

To summarize briefly, SMDPR allots seats proportionally within predetermined regions and then ranks each party's local candidates to determine who will fill those seats, with each riding represented by one candidate who ran in that riding. To win, a candidate must rank highly in a party that was allotted seats and must be more popular than any other such candidate in the riding. Plurality rule remains one determinant of winning, but it is no longer the sole determinant.

By maintaining the same ballot, riding boundaries, number of MPs, and their local nature, SMDPR demonstrates that moving from first past the post toward treating everyone's vote fairly is not a binary choice between maintaining the status quo and completely overhauling the system.

In conclusion, equal voice for votes is critical to a modern definition of democracy. PR is the political face in Parliament of the right to equal voice for votes at the ballot box. One implies the other, but we needn't change all that much to achieve both.

Thank you for your kind attention, and we look forward to your questions.

●(1515)

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Falvey, are you presenting at all?

Mr. Denis Falvey (As an Individual): No, I'm going to beg off on the grounds that I have some problems speaking. I can go for a while, but unfortunately, I then start coughing. I will answer questions if they come.

The Chair: Sure.

Mr. Majka.

Mr. Christopher Majka (Director, Democracy: Vox Populi): Thank you very much for this opportunity.

I'm Christopher Majka, director of Democracy: Vox Populi, an advocacy group concerned with democratic and electoral issues. I have also been active for a decade with Fair Vote Canada, and its chapter here, Fair Vote Nova Scotia, as well as with Project Democracy, all of which are interested in issues of electoral and democratic reform.

I'd like to begin by saying that electoral reform is critically important for the future of Canadian democracy. The idea that citizens should determine the governance of a country was a radical one that originated in the 6th century BC, in Athens. For over two and a half millennia, it has spread throughout much of the world, and as it has dispersed it has evolved.

In Athens only land-owning men who were over 20 and were not slaves were permitted to vote. In Canada, the secret ballot was introduced in 1874, and women were enfranchised in 1918. There were once voting restrictions related to wealth, religion, race, and ethnicity in Canada. All these have now been eliminated and we recognize that they're incompatible with an inclusive, egalitarian and fair society.

One important obstacle that does remain is the first-past-the-post electoral system. It's understandable how it came into being. From 1867 to 1920—

The Chair: Excuse me, Mr. Majka, for the benefit of the interpreters please go a bit slower. We'll give you more time if you need it.

Mr. Christopher Majka: Okay. Thank you.

There were effectively two political parties, Conservatives and Liberals. In a two party polity, first past the post produces acceptably democratic outcomes, and for the first third of our country's existence that was how things were done. However, in 1921, the Progressive Party and United Farmers Party came into being. Since then—almost a century—there has never been a period when less than three, and frequently four or five political parties, have been represented in Parliament.

The proliferation of parties characterizes the evolution of democracy in the 20th and 21st centuries and is a positive development that we need to attune our electoral system to. It doesn't require great mathematical acumen to understand why first past the post begins to break down when there are more than two parties. The greater the number, the more unrepresentative are electoral outcomes as a result of splits in the vote.

Because outcome is determined exclusively by which party's candidate is first, de facto every vote cast for every candidate other than the runner-up amounts to a vote for the winner. This leads to highly unrepresentative results in which the spectrum of elected candidates can depart dramatically from levels of support in the country. Thus, parties that have significant support, but rank numerically second in many ridings have a much diminished chance of parliamentary representation. Parties ranked third or fourth, even though they may include hundreds of thousands of Canadians, have only a miniscule chance of representation.

This is problematic for the democratic health of a country. First of all, on first principles, we ought to strive for a Parliament that fairly represents the spectrum of political belief in our country. Second, with a plurality of parties in the political field, outcomes under the first-past-the-post system give rise to the view that many ballots are wasted and that these political convictions result in no meaningful democratic expression. Such voters feel disenfranchised by the system. This, not unreasonably, gives rise to political cynicism, and nowhere more so than among young voters.

I'm not suggesting that first past the post is entirely responsible for a declining turnout, but there is evidence that unrepresented outcomes contribute to an alienation from electoral participation and political engagement. Canada has not been alone in this regard, and many mature, stable democracies in the developed world have adopted better electoral systems. Indeed, in the developed world, only Canada, Great Britain and the United States continue to employ first past the post. Systems of proportional representation are employed in 94 countries at last count. Voters in all these jurisdictions have been able to understand and employ PR, and there's no reason to suppose that Canadians would be any less adept.

There are a number of different approaches to proportional representation, including party list, mixed member and single transferable vote systems, and there are variations on how these are implemented. There's a large discourse around their respective advantages. However, I'm not going to encumber you with a pitch for one or the other since, in my view, the most salient issue is that we implement proportional representation and not, for example, a ranked ballot system. In my view, electoral systems that are based on pure proportionality, such as those in Israel or Italy, would not be suitable in the Canadian context.

It's also worth underscoring that although electoral reform is not a panacea for all political problems, it can play an important role in contributing to a more productive political climate. With minority or coalition governments a frequent outcome with proportional representation, there is a necessity for political parties to work together. With several parties around the table, everyone has a stake in reaching a mutually acceptable solution. With representatives of multiple parties involved in decision making, there's a sense of ownership of the decision, even if every party did not achieve all that was desired. Simply put, this results in better governance and an easier path for public acceptance of government decisions.

Finally, with respect to ranked ballot systems, which are used for federal elections only in Australia and Papua New Guinea, this approach produces more representative results than first past the post in a non-partisan context. It is, however, a winner-take-all majoritarian approach which, while suitable for selecting a single position, is completely unsuitable for selecting a representative body and does nothing to address proportional inequalities.

For all these reasons, our choice in Canada should be clear. For a vibrant democracy and representative fairness, we require the implementation of a system of proportional representation.

Thank you.

●(1520)

The Chair: Thank you.

We'll go to questions now.

Mr. DeCourcey, for five minutes.

Mr. Matt DeCourcey: Thank you very much, and thank you to all of our presenters this morning.

Mr. Risser, I wonder if you could explain in a little more depth for the four of us on this side and everyone else in the committee exactly what single member district proportional representation effectively does as the person goes to the ballot and what the results might look like.

Mr. Matt Risser: Okay.

We weren't aware of the others, but I think you guys heard about fairly similar systems from Mr. Green in Alberta and Ms. Tremblay yesterday in Montreal. I'm not sure they're entirely comparable because I haven't seen their briefs, but they seem broadly similar. The only difference I can see is that they seem to allocate seats by party in sequence, and ours are simultaneous, so all parties would get their seats.

Let's take Nova Scotia as an example, because we're in Nova Scotia. You'd take the total vote that all of the local candidates running in the province of Nova Scotia got. That determines how many seats each party is allocated, and then you rank the candidates in each party according to how well they performed in their individual ridings. The top performers get the seats to which their party is entitled, unless there's a situation where two parties match one candidate to the same seat; then whichever of the two candidates got the more votes wins.

It's a proportional system that maintains the single member in a district, so there's only one person who ran in each riding representing each riding now. As with the other systems that you heard about, that doesn't necessarily mean it's the person who got the most votes in that riding.

Does that help?

●(1525)

Mr. Matt DeCourcey: It does, and I thought that was where we were headed. In Nova Scotia, last election, you would have had 11 Liberal candidates win the popular vote in each riding—have a plurality of the popular vote, and in some cases a majority of the popular vote in each riding—but only seven of them would have been elected

Mr. Matt Risser: Yes.

Mr. Matt DeCourcey: You would have had four first place finishers in the ridings who would have not taken the seat, and either the second or potentially the third place finisher in that riding would take the seat.

Mr. Matt Risser: Yes.

Mr. Matt DeCourcey: Do you see the psychological barrier that may be in play here as we explain to voters that, yes, they might vote for a candidate who carries the greatest number of votes in a riding but will not be necessarily elected to that seat?

Mr. Matt Risser: We fully expected that.

Denis has a prepared answer that he can read to you on that point.

Mr. Denis Falvey: It will take a couple of minutes. Is that a problem?

Mr. Matt DeCourcey: Absolutely not. Go ahead.

Mr. Denis Falvey: When a candidate with the most votes loses, we call it a losing plurality just to define terms, a plurality being the most votes, whether or not it's a majority—the most votes.

To explain losing pluralities, it's important to understand why they sometimes occur, but it's also important to consider their effects on the voters, parties, and candidates. SMDPR shifts focus away from individual candidate performance in ridings toward team performance by parties in regions, attempting to draft the best of each party for the proportionately allotted seats.

The only reason a person loses a plurality under SMDPR is that their party has already won so much that any more would be unfair. This is specifically because each vote is given equal voice in Parliament on a regional basis and not discarded among the wasted votes on a riding basis. Should Parliament be animated by the voices of the nation, or should those voices be silenced in ridings by the plurality rule? Would we rather accept that a candidate might sometimes lose with the most votes or that a majority government might rule with the fewest votes?

In exchange for a losing plurality under SMDPR, the voter gets a voice in Parliament, a local representative with a huge incentive to perform well, increased accountability of the MP in the next election, and an incentive to engage the system. Parties have incentives to contest every vote everywhere, are allotted appropriate partisan voice, and get mostly their best candidates elected. Candidates know that safe ridings and wasted votes can't preclude them from winning. It is possible to be elected in any riding, and they know their efforts help the party, whether they personally win or lose.

Plurality losses are not a defect of SMDPR. They correct the only defect of our current first-past-the-post system. First past the post is SMDPR with a region size of one, so there's very little change, in that sense.

To a losing plurality candidate I would say, "You did well, but other candidates in your party did better than you, and they took all the seats the people of this region wanted the party to have. The votes for you counted toward your party's success and, in fact, everyone's vote counted equally. That's democracy".

I've heard the comments that there would be rioting in the streets and civil war. The only way to know if Canadians would accept some losing pluralities as the price for all the other things that you would get out of SMDPR is to ask them.

Thank you.

● (1530)

Mr. Matt DeCourcey: Thank you.

As I'm listening, I—

The Chair: Your time is up.

Mr. Matt DeCourcey: Oh, no.

The Chair: That was such a disappointed cry, Mr. DeCourcey, I'll let you go ahead, but just very briefly.

Mr. Matt DeCourcey: I can't do it briefly.

The Chair: Let me show you the time that you guys have had—

Mr. Matt DeCourcey: No, Mr. Chair, I'll consult with my colleagues, and we'll bring it back.

The Chair: Okay. Thank you, Mr. DeCourcey.

Mr. Richards.

Mr. Blake Richards: It might help, Mr. DeCourcey, that I have the same types of questions. Maybe we'll get to where you were looking to go.

I share some of those same concerns. I think it would be very difficult for voters to accept that the person they chose to be their representative would not necessarily be the representative in the riding. That's a significant drawback to the system you're proposing here.

That actually raises one of the questions I have for each of you today. One thing that's been made quite clear to us throughout our meetings across the country, and prior to that in Ottawa, is that there is no such thing as a perfect electoral system. I don't think one witness who's come before us has said, "Yes, I absolutely think I know the perfect system, and there's no drawback to this system."

When we are designing a system, obviously we're looking at the different trade-offs that go with it, the positives and negatives. We're trying to come up with what we think is best in particularly the Canadian context, because our country is different from almost every other country in the world with regard to its size, its regional diversity, its sparseness in population, and a variety of other factors.

Mr. Risser and Mr. Falvey, you have come proposing your single member district PR system. What are the potential drawbacks, or what many people would see as drawbacks, to the system you're proposing? You've had a chance to explain some of the positives and what you would see as the rationale for wanting to go to that system. I wonder if you have any other comments you want to make with regard to some of the drawbacks you would see and the trade-offs that would come with your system.

Mr. Matt Risser: First of all, Denis and I aren't wedded to SMDPR. The only thing we're really wedded to is equal voice for equal votes. Any of the proportional alternatives on offer would be equally satisfactory to us.

We created—or Denis created, and I helped refine—SMDPR as a way to sell it to people who are hesitant because it's too much change. In that sense, the majority of time nothing would change under our current system in that the person who got the plurality would win. I don't want to overestimate the number of cases in which that would occur. As well—

Mr. Blake Richards: May I stop you for a second?

Mr. Matt Risser: Go ahead.

Mr. Blake Richards: We heard the example of the 2015 election in terms of what it would do here in Nova Scotia. Do you happen to have the numbers to tell us what kind of change we would have seen in, say, 2011, or 2008, or any of the other elections previous to that, just to give us a sense of it? You say it wouldn't change significantly in most elections. Do you have some numbers?

Mr. Matt Risser: The trouble with doing it that way is that while it's convenient as a proof of concept, you can't take one system based on how people are incentivized to vote and change it and know how they're going to vote. We can tell you that we've also tried to triangulate it with a few single vote MMP systems that are used in Germany to see, when people know it's proportional but they only have one vote, how much of a difference this would make. We can share that stuff with you, but I don't know how useful it will be.

I did want to make one point, though, in reference to a point you made about there being no perfect system, because this is something the committee says a lot. I just want to say that just because there's no perfect system, which there isn't, obviously, it doesn't mean that some systems aren't better than others.

Mr. Blake Richards: No, no. Sure.

Mr. Matt Risser: They're not equal.

● (1535)

Mr. Blake Richards: We have to look at the competing trade-offs and try to figure out which one is best for our country.

Mr. Matt Risser: Yes.

Mr. Blake Richards: Exactly.

In terms of independent candidates, from reading the brief you sent, you give three criteria to be able to win under the system. The first one is to belong to a party that has proportionally won seats in the province or territory. Does that rule out the possibility of an independent candidate? What effect would this system have on an independent candidate? It seems based on those criteria that it would.

Mr. Matt Risser: We looked at that. There is a situation where under all other proportional systems, independents would have the same access in the riding in MMP or in list PR or STV or whatever. We struggled with that. The solution we came up with was that independents would run in local ridings the same way they do now, but they could voluntarily group their votes. The system we proposed has region sizes of about 10 to 15 in the larger provinces, and then, in the smaller provinces, the province is the region. It's the case that independents wouldn't be disadvantaged necessarily as much as they are under first past the post generally, because they could group the votes and transfer the same way it works within parties. But it would have to be voluntary, because independents could be diverse in their views.

Mr. Blake Richards: Thank you.

The Chair: Thanks very much.

Mr. Cullen, please.

Mr. Nathan Cullen: Thanks very much to our witnesses today.

I'm interested in the exchange you were just having, Mr. Risser, about all the systems being just differently imperfect as we look around. I think what you've offered us today is helpful. You've probably heard the committee or witnesses many times talk about coming up with a made-in-Canada type of system, because Canada is particular in all sorts of ways, some of them imagined but many of them quite real, and our voting system should reflect that. I was just reviewing the Japanese voting system, because it was brought up earlier. It's confusing for me.

That's helpful, but I can't get around that intuitive piece under your system that Halifax Centre could vote somebody top of the ballot, a well-liked, popular person, yet that person would not become the MP. You'd be able to justify their vote in saying that it contributed towards other people in other districts. If I'm a voter and I have attachment to that person or party or leadership, whatever it was that determined my vote, I want that person. I'm not sure how satisfied I'd feel saying that I contributed to somebody in Dartmouth getting ahead for that party.

Do you understand my challenge and perhaps some of the challenges of the other MPs around the table?

Mr. Matt Risser: Yes. The perception issue is definitely there. I would say that for me, as a voter, far more important than individual MPs is the fact that the government not be elected with fewer votes than the opposition. I think that speaks to the major difference between proportional and majoritarian systems. Under proportional systems, we're one nation electing one Parliament, and under majoritarian systems, we've become no more than an aggregate of 338 ridings.

There are lots of other systems on offer. The only thing I'd urge you to do is to look at some of the benefits of SMDPR that counter that perception. Parties would have to run slates of candidates in all ridings because they couldn't be entirely sure who was going to win. There's enhanced accountability locally, actually, because just getting the plurality isn't the same. I wouldn't want you to dismiss SMDPR out of hand.

Mr. Nathan Cullen: No and I hope you don't that get that from what I said.

Mr. Matt Risser: No, I don't at all. I would say just look at our brief and look at the benefits.

Mr. Nathan Cullen: What I would look to in this, as we look ahead to this committee's work, is to put together a proposal and come to some agreement around this table, which I think is very possible, because the committee is working really well together.

Correct me if I get any of this wrong, but I did walk this away from your presentation: that 30% didn't vote; for the 32% of Canadians who did vote, votes were cast for a person who is not represented in the House of Commons; votes from 11% of Canadians who voted went to MPs that were already above their plurality and were just sort of "feel-good"; the majority government, with exactly 100% of the power, got 10% of the effective votes; and the opposition was elected opposition with 9% of the effective votes.

Mr. Matt Risser: Yes. First of all, what you have to look at is this. If you look at the total voting age population rather than the registered turnout, which is what tends to get reported, only 62% of Canadians voted. We got those figures from the voter turnout database at the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance, which in turn got them from Statistics Canada. Of the 62% who voted, or whatever it was—this is the voting age adult population—32% voted for losing candidates all across the country. Another 12% were the surplus that they didn't need to win.

In terms of the effective vote, yes, the votes that it took to elect Parliament came from about 19% to 20% of the population. About half of that was to elect the government.

●(1540)

Mr. Nathan Cullen: Mr. Falvey may or may not want to answer this question. We were looking at a study out of Elections Manitoba that was asking non-voters, people who didn't vote in their previous provincial election, why not, and what would change their habit, i.e., would they vote if...? Half of the people who didn't vote said they would vote under a proportional system, one in which their vote went towards electing somebody somewhere. That motivation of voice or power is the strongest motivation, more than what day the voting is held and whether it's online or not.

That's just a comment, and I'm open to hearing your reactions to it.

Perhaps Mr. Majka can go first, and then Mr. Risser.

Mr. Christopher Majka: Yes, it's a very good point. There has been some excellent work by Frank Graves at EKOS that has looked at this issue of motivation. It's clearly important, and it's clearly more important the younger the age demographic of the people you're looking at.

Certainly my work in advocacy kind of bridges the gap between the academic perspective that you heard earlier today from the two political scientists here, or historians, and activists. That's a very salient issue. I'm getting a little long in the tooth and gray in the hair these days, but particularly some of my younger colleagues find the kind of frustrations that many people experience as a result of the first-past-the-post system really troubling to the point that they're dissuaded from political engagement. That, I think, is a serious issue. We see that Elections Canada has been tracking youth turnout since the year 2000, and over that time period, the youth turnout has been about half of what the regular turnout has been.

I think it's tremendously important in that context to look at electoral reform as a way not only of maintaining a healthy democracy but of really re-engaging those people, and not only young people—

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Go ahead, Ms. May.

Ms. Elizabeth May: When Blake Richards was asking the question, he said something about not having one witness who has said that there's a perfect system, and it hit me that we did. We had one witness who said that—if you remember too, Sherry. We had Sean Graham in the Edmonton hearings who invented dual member proportional, which Matt did a brilliant job of summarizing to the last panel. It was brilliant. I was impressed.

I don't know how many of you were here when Matt was describing the dual member proportional, because he did it just right, but he said the region would be Atlantic Canada. I did pursue it with him afterwards. Let me just summarize it again.

His system was that we pair ridings. You'd elect two MPs. The first person would be elected on the current system, and the second person in that riding would be elected, essentially, under your system. Then the proportionality was by region. What irked Matt a bit, I think, was that Atlantic Canada was a region. But I pursued it with Sean Graham afterwards, and he said that with his system, by clustering rather large regions, you get down to only 3% of votes not being effective votes. But if you were to create smaller regions, such

as provincial boundaries, it only creates up to 10% not effective votes.

It's one of the ones that I'm interested in. I'm obviously interested in any proportional voting system that fits the Canadian context, that respects rural and remote ridings, and that as much as possible avoids clustering ridings or having to have massive redistribution efforts that are costly.

Keeping the system familiar is, I think, what you've both tried to do. I appreciate that Mr. Falvey is more involved with having created the system, perhaps, but can't speak to it as well today, but you're both a good team.

I want to ask you whether you would see that as being an interesting system, because it's quite similar to yours, but I think if people get their first-past-the-post choice as one MP within a cluster of two ridings, that's still really local and still quite proportionate, if you've looked at that.

I want to ask Christopher Majka if he's looked at that as well, because it has similarities to MMP, but without having to have the list part. It's a bit of a hybrid for Canada, but quite adaptable to our current reality.

●(1545)

Mr. Matt Risser: The first thing I'd say is that in my opening remarks I did talk about these four things that can be changed to achieve electoral reform. I am familiar with dual member proportional, and Sean Graham and I think it's a perfectly acceptable system, as is any other system that achieves proportionality. Personally I like list PR the best, straight up, but I know I'm in the minority in Canada on that. If you look at these four criteria, that might give you an effective set of criteria to judge different systems. Ours is the only one that I'm familiar with that only changes one, but there are a number that can achieve proportionality with arguably only changing two. There's the dual member, the Baden-Württemberg, which I know has been raised a lot in the committee, and nearest runner-up MMP. Arguably you don't have to change the ballot—well, you don't have to change the ballot for any MMP system—and you wouldn't necessarily have to change the nature of MPs, arguably, because they're still highly localized.

All I would say to that is, you know, we're fine with any system. I think SMDPR deserves its day in court, as it were, but that might be a good way for you to judge alternatives, in terms of how much they change or how easy they will be to accept in the Canadian experience.

Regarding SMDPR, I should say too that the constitutional requirement, as far as I know, is only that provinces have a specific number of seats, right? It's a bit murky in terms of votes crossing boundaries to determine who gets elected in other provinces, but you could do SMDPR the same way, but that could lead to regionalization, so we recommended a more regional way.

Ms. Elizabeth May: Mr. Majka, do you have any comments? I should just admit that we are old friends. Christopher, do you have any comments?

Mr. Christopher Majka: Yes. I think there's an important balancing act in all of these discussions. Certainly, this committee is on the cutting edge of that, and I applaud your attempt. The balancing act is finding an electoral system that expresses well the political will and political convictions in the country—and in my view, various proportional approaches are the way to doing that—and Elizabeth, what you just mentioned, which is the comprehensibility of a system.

I happen to have a degree in mathematics, so formulae and complex ways of calculating votes and so forth are not dissuading to me, but I understand that it's an important selling job from the standpoint of parliamentarians to come across with a system that won't make people just tear their hair out and won't look completely opaque. That's really the cusp of the system.

For example, systems like MMP have certain disadvantages, but they seem very clear and comprehensible: you vote for a candidate; you vote for a party, and there are a couple of things you fill out. You can create larger districts with it, but it's not such an incredibly arcane approach that many Canadians might have a real problem in assimilating it.

The Chair: Thank you.

We'll go to Ms. Sahota now, please.

Ms. Ruby Sahota: The initial part of my questions will be for Mr. Risser and Mr. Falvey.

We had a few questions regarding this yesterday and the other day, too. As we are talking about this, I'm thinking about a different element of this now. We've been talking a lot about getting women to run. I have to say, as my colleague Sherry says often, I wasn't even thinking about how we cast ballots, how we don't cast ballots, or whether there's an alternative way when making my decision. One thing I was thinking about is what this campaign was going to look like. Previously, there had been some nasty campaign battles in my riding, and you think before running about whether you want to put your family through that.

We've been trying to figure out ways to create more collaborative government and decrease that toxicity. But to me, as I'm imagining the scenario of this system, it seems as if that toxicity would all be funnelled into the campaign portion of it, because you're no longer running against other candidates from other parties, but you're also running against your own candidates from your own party. Maybe a larger party might be able to deal with that, but give an example of smaller parties. How would they handle that kind of inner competition with each other? We went to Elizabeth May's riding, and she is very popular in Victoria. Say that we have to find Green candidates to run in the rest of Victoria, and essentially they'd be trying to get their percentage up higher than Elizabeth's. I think that would be hard to do. How would you convince them to run there? Would the party really increase in numbers, or would you just end up having not a lot people interested in participating in it?

● (1550)

Mr. Matt Risser: This is an argument that gets made against a lot of PR systems—open list, STV, etc.—that there's party fracturing, because you're running against members of your own party. All the research I've seen, and that's by no means exhaustive, says that it's really not that big a deal in those systems.

SMDPR actually prevents it, because you're running against people in your own party but not directly. You're running indirectly. If I'm the local candidate in a specific riding, and all the party votes are grouped, I'm not running against you, and I actually benefit by your doing well. Everybody is trying to do better than the next person, but there's no situation I can envision in which suppressing the votes of somebody else is going to benefit you.

We looked at this, and one of the things we settled on, too, was to rank candidates based on the percentage of the electorate, because that does two things. One, it disincentivizes voter suppression. If you did it by percentages of the vote in each riding, then you would incentivize some candidates to suppress the votes of others. Two, it allows for variable riding size. But all the incentives under SMDPR are for you to try to get your individual vote turnout as high as possible, and also to try to get your party's vote across the region as high as possible. There's no internal competition in that way, because if you're trying to drive down the votes of other candidates in your party in other ridings, you're actually making it harder for yourself to get elected. Right?

Ms. Ruby Sahota: That's a good point, actually. I think you could think of it in both ways. Even the way the system runs now, I had people approaching me at times saying, "It's great how you guys are all a team. You're really focused on that team spirit in this election." They would argue for that. Then there would be some old-school thinkers saying, "Oh, at the end of the day, you're still all in competition."

It doesn't have to be that way. We don't have to think that way. The better all the people do in all the different ridings, the better the party does and the more seats you gain. Essentially we are a team. But I feel like there still would be a bit of a block because, yes, you want your colleagues to do well, but you don't want them to do better than you. You want to get that seat. In the system we currently have or in some of the other systems that have been proposed, I don't think that's necessarily the case.

Mr. Denis Falvey: You actually do want them to do better than you, because you get more seats that way. The more you drive up the vote percentage for your party, the more seats you're allotted. If your colleagues do better, there are more seats available for you to fill.

Ms. Ruby Sahota: Of course the party would do better, but at the end of the day, I think the nature of a lot of people is to not always think about how much better off their party is in the long run. Oftentimes they think of individual motivations. I don't know; I hope that is the scenario. It is interesting. At any rate, it was just an aspect I hadn't thought about before. I thought I'd throw it out there to see whether or not it was a valid thought of mine.

I have a question for Mr. Majka, if I have more time.

The Chair: You don't, actually. That was an interesting exchange. It was a very good point, I thought.

There's something I don't understand, so just to follow up on Ms. Sahota's point—

Mrs. Sherry Romanado: Chair, I was going to follow up on that when it was my turn. I have the same line of questioning.

The Chair: Okay. Sure. But mine is more a point of clarification.

You said that the members of your party in the region doing well increases your chances as well. Could you explain that to me?

Mr. Matt Risser: The more votes in each region that your party gets, the more seats it's likely to get. Right?

The Chair: Right.

Mr. Matt Risser: They're allotted proportionally. By driving that up, you increase your own chances for election, because we rank each candidate in the local ridings to fill the seats.

The Chair: Okay, thank you.

We'll go to Mr. Nater now.

Mr. John Nater: I might start with a quick question for clarification.

In response to Ms. Sahota's question, you mentioned something about looking at potentially the percentage of the electorate versus the percentage of the vote. Is that actually proposed in your model?

Mr. Matt Risser: Yes.

Mr. John Nater: It is. So it's a percentage of the electorate.

Mr. Matt Risser: It's not necessary, but we've given you a preferred model, and that includes it, yes.

● (1555)

Mr. John Nater: As a follow-up to that, often we see certain communities, certain demographics, who traditionally don't show up to vote, or don't show up to vote in higher numbers. Do you see a concern there with how that might disenfranchise certain communities who may not traditionally have higher voter turnout?

Mr. Matt Risser: I don't know quite what you mean.

Mr. John Nater: We often see that indigenous communities don't tend to have a high voter turnout. By tying this to a percentage of overall turnout in the community, do you see a way that may be a challenge to certain communities like indigenous communities overall?

Mr. Matt Risser: I don't think so. I'm an institutionalist like Dr. Bickerton. I fully believe in institutional incentive shaping behaviour. This would incentivize the candidates who are running to try to get as many people in their riding out to vote for them as they can and to up their own turnout against other people in their party. All the incentives are not about everybody being lovey-dovey and warm and fuzzy and working for the greater good. The incentives drive you there for your electoral success. I don't know quite how that would disenfranchise certain minorities, certainly not more than the current system does.

Mr. John Nater: I'll leave it there, because I do want to go back to something else you mentioned.

You said that about 81% potentially could have stayed home and the electoral result would have been more or less the same. The logical step I want to take is that there were people who actually did stay home.

Mr. Matt Risser: No, I included those people.

Mr. John Nater: That's where I'm going with it. Is there a challenge, or is there an opportunity for us to be looking more so at mandatory voting, compulsory voting, some kind of fine or incentive for people to vote, as kind of a first step to address that 30-plus per cent of the population who simply don't show up?

Mr. Matt Risser: I would argue that you should exhaust all carrots before you move to sticks.

I don't think it benefits us to take a system where people find their voice isn't included and then force them to vote. Number one, I don't think we should talk about mandatory voting. Mandatory attendance, the fact that you would have to show up at a poll and take a ballot, that I'm a little more open to. I haven't voted in past elections for some of the reasons Mr. Cullen was talking about. A "none of the above" option wouldn't have satisfied my concerns. I wouldn't have wanted to cast a ballot. That would be an issue of free speech for me, really.

I'm not, on spec, against mandatory attendance, and I don't think Denis is either. But I don't think trying to legitimize an archaic system of power works the same way. You should use that when there are other alternatives available.

Mr. John Nater: Mr. Majka, do you have any comments on compulsory voting or mandatory voting?

Mr. Christopher Majka: I agree with Mr. Risser. I'm not sure that this is a productive direction. Like him, I think carrots are much more interesting to wield than sticks. I think there are many things within our power to incentivize democratic participation. This committee's considering quite a number of those.

It seems to me that if we make an electoral system that really makes manifest that people's voices can be heard, that will draw lots of people, and people who are engaged. There's an argument which says that those who show up make the decisions, and I think there's some merit to that. If people are completely disinterested in politics, so be it. That's a democratic choice as well.

Mr. John Nater: In your opening comments, you mentioned young people as being one of those groups that don't tend to show up. Would you support some kind of change to the voting age, to lower the voting age to perhaps 16, as an opportunity for students to have that first opportunity to vote when they're still in school, when they're still in educational institutions?

Mr. Christopher Majka: I think that's something we should look at very carefully. Other jurisdictions around the world have lower voting ages. I think there are lots of ways in which we want to engage people early on in understanding that politics are important, that there are salient and consequential decisions for everyone, including particularly young people, who will be around the longest. Consequently, we should do what we can, reasonably, to draw them into that process.

The Chair: Now we'll go to Mr. Aldag.

● (1600)

Mr. John Aldag: Mr. Risser and Mr. Falvey, I have to tell you that I'm a bit stuck in the weeds here in the details. I need you to explain, because I'm not catching something.

I think it's an intriguing option. I commend you for having spent some time on coming up with something that could be made in Canada. I think, well, this may be the one, but then this is where I get stuck. As I understand it, you have five parties in a region. Would each province be a region? Have you taken it down to that level? What are the regions?

Mr. Matt Risser: Under our preferred model, the six smallest provinces are regions. The four large ones of B.C., Alberta, Ontario, and Quebec we would recommend you divide up into regions of 10 to 15, something like that.

I know you heard in some of your testimony in the north that the northerners, like Atlantic Canadians, don't want to be grouped together, but we grouped the north into a three member region, each with an individual riding on the same boundaries as now. The votes in the different ridings would affect who got elected in each of the individual ridings.

Mr. John Aldag: Okay, we have regions. Votes are cast. You have a breakdown. Each party would be ranked. You could have whatever the breakdown is. Then you go through the top-ranking candidates, and you assign the top....

I've been trying to work with some numbers here. If you have 52%, would you then assign five of the top-ranking candidates to the ridings they've won?

Mr. Matt Risser: Yes.

Mr. John Aldag: Okay. Where I get lost is in the next piece of it. Could you actually have the second-ranking candidates representing the party in that same riding?

Mr. Matt Risser: No. This is what happens. In an instance where there's a clash, where two parties would match one candidate to the same district, then whoever won the plurality in that district wins the seat and you would take the other party and give it another riding somewhere—

Mr. John Aldag: An unassigned seat.

Mr. Matt Risser: Yes. Where no other candidate, except one from that party, ranks sufficiently in—

Mr. John Aldag: Then how far down do you go if you have a party that gets 3%? Does it get a seat?

Mr. Matt Risser: It depends—

Mr. John Aldag: Have you looked at thresholds so—

Mr. Matt Risser: Our system doesn't really require a formal threshold because, if you go by 10 to 15 in each individual region and break up the country into regions, or the four largest provinces, then I think you have a pretty solid, effective threshold, meaning you need this number of votes to be assigned a seat, whether or not there's a formal threshold. Right? There are formal thresholds at the national level, but because this is broken up into regions, you don't need a formal national-level threshold in the same way.

Just as a matter of interest, we tend to think of thresholds as necessary, and perhaps they are for a country like this, but the Netherlands doesn't use one, and it seems to be working pretty well.

I tend to be ambiguous about thresholds.

Mr. John Aldag: In some of the systems, we hear about two classes of MPs. I guess that's not an issue with this. You're simply elected. It doesn't matter if you're sitting in the House with 5% of the support of your district or 75%.

Are people still seen as equals in that kind of scenario?

Mr. Denis Falvey: Maybe I'll give you an example. I wrote it out in one of the documents.

If you had a region consisting of 10 ridings—and we call districts and ridings the same thing—and the Green Party had 10% in each of the 10 ridings, they wouldn't elect anybody under our current system, but they would have one guaranteed seat under this system, SMDPR. Obviously, that seat would be a losing plurality, because 10% is not going to win under our current system. But that's how you decide how many seats they're going to get, based on how many votes they got in the region. Which person gets the seat depends on how the party's individual candidates are ranked within the party. Obviously, the top candidate gets the first shot at it.

In the riding I'm in, South Shore—St. Margarets, in the last election, the Liberal and the Conservative both ranked highly on their respective lists. Obviously, they can't both represent the same riding—at least not under this system that we designed—and the Liberal had the highest number of votes locally, so she would have won.

● (1605)

Mr. John Aldag: In that case, the Conservative, as you said, wouldn't be parachuted in somewhere, so it maintains the local connection.

Mr. Denis Falvey: No, that Conservative is out of it, but he would be replaced by some other Conservative in his own riding.

Mr. John Aldag: It makes a lot more sense. Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Aldag.

Go ahead, Mr. MacGregor.

Mr. Alistair MacGregor: I'm going to direct my questions to Mr. Risser and Mr. Falvey.

Under the rules that this committee is operating by, the second part of the mandate is one of the ones I'm interested in, especially where it talks about offering opportunities for inclusion of under-represented groups in the political process. That's very important for me because I hail from Vancouver Island, out in British Columbia. My riding is home to the largest first nation band in British Columbia. When you look at Canada's first nations and, indeed, many minorities, you'll see that the current look of our Parliament does not really accurately reflect under-represented groups.

I really appreciate the work that you've done in developing this system. I know starting anything from scratch and building it up into something is very hard.

You basically are taking the same first-past-the-post system in how you get the candidates but then rejigging the rules afterwards.

I wonder if you could both comment on the problem of under-represented groups in Canada. Would your system alleviate that, do you think? Could you offer some comments on that?

Mr. Matt Risser: First things first. I think we have to distinguish between what some people might call descriptive representation, meaning people like women and minorities and such in the House, and for lack of a better term, substantive representation, meaning that the views of minorities and women and such are better represented in policy and decision-making.

That also tends to get to this issue of fairness. When we talk about wasted votes, we should really distinguish between input fairness and output fairness. Canada has input fairness—nobody disputes that; every vote is counted fairly—but output fairness is that every vote counts fairly. I would say any system that provides equal voice for votes is going to provide greater diversity of substantive representation in our political system.

One comment we do get for SMDPR is whether there is a risk that it won't provide descriptive representation in that you're still running in the local ridings in the same way. I think there are two counter-arguments to that, which do seem a little counterintuitive. One is that by incentivizing parties to reach out at the local level no matter how well they've done in the past—you've always had an incentive to improve your voter percentage—you have to reach out to a broad range of groups, so you might want a candidate who is more diverse. I know Tony Hodgson used the male, pale, and stale line.

Mr. Nathan Cullen: [*Inaudible—Editor*]

Voices: Oh, oh!

Mr. Matt Risser: Sorry.

The other thing is that, by not having to have every candidate obtain a plurality to win and by focusing more on parties as teams at the regional level, parties have a little more flexibility, I would argue, probably than they do under the current system, where the only thing that matters is the plurality vote at the riding level.

Denis, is there anything you want to say?

Mr. Denis Falvey: No, that was perfect.

Mr. Alistair MacGregor: Mr. Majka, I'll turn to you, sir, in the same vein.

I know that one thing is very clear: Canadians really want to have that geographic link to their member of Parliament. The question then is how we make that a bit fairer.

If you look at a mixed member proportional system, or indeed any proportional system, and you go to the issue of lists, how do you see the best system working: a closed list, which would allow parties to maybe put forward more minorities, or an open list where voters can actually have that choice of the actual person they want?

Do you want to go into that further?

Mr. Christopher Majka: This is an interesting trade-off there, and I very much agree with you that I think there are some real advantages to having a geographic linkage to representation. We

have a very large and diverse country, and there is importance, I think, in having a geographically based opportunity to express that diversity. Within Canada we know we have distinctive cultures throughout the country, so those are very important things to consider.

In terms of the closed versus open criterion that you were mentioning, I'm a little agnostic in some sense about this. It's a bit six of one and half a dozen of another in terms of the trade-offs. All in all, possibly, closed lists are a better option, if we entrust parties to provide a wealth of representation and really good candidates that could fit in that category, and presumably within parties there's a certain amount of democratic discussion and debate in terms of how you form those kinds of lists and who should be prioritized and how. Even though that may be on an intra-party level, it nevertheless reflects democratic processes within the country.

I don't feel strongly one way or the other, but the geographical basis is a key distinction.

● (1610)

The Chair: Thank you.

We'll go now to Monsieur Rayes.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Alain Rayes: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Mr. Majka, you said in your presentation that if the voting system were replaced by some type of proportional system, there would perforce be an increase in voter turnout, which is one of the objectives of the committee, I believe.

That said, I would like to know the basis for that statement. I'll explain why.

Professor André Blais, from the Université de Montréal, gave a presentation at the House of Commons on the various voting systems. I believe he was accompanied by Ms. Antonia Maioni, from McGill University. For your information, in Quebec it is thought that Mr. Blais is probably the professor who has done the most research on proportional voting systems. We asked him if proportional voting systems led to a higher participation rate, and he answered that nothing pointed to that. He added that in the countries that used such systems, the increase or decrease in voter turnout was around 3%.

He stated that in fact, this type of system often increases the number of parties, which instead causes a decline in voter participation. The most striking example he gave was New Zealand. It is one of the few countries to have gone from a system like ours to a proportional system. It's a rather unusual case. And the voter turnout there has declined by 10% in 10 years.

I'd like to know the basis for your statement, or perception. The researchers could include that information in their report.

[*English*]

Mr. Christopher Majka: These are excellent questions. I can direct you to a document that's available on the Fair Vote Canada site. It's an extensive study, a meta study, as it were, done by Arend Lijphart, who looked at a whole series of metrics related to what happens when you introduce systems of proportional representation. One whole section of that is on voter turnout, in which he looks at a variety of states and a variety of time periods—elections—under which elections were conducted.

In any event, the summary of that is, with these controls in place, consensus democracies, in other words, ones that are running proportional representation systems, have approximately 7.5 percentage points higher turnout than majoritarian governments. That's a meta study of turnout in a number of jurisdictions.

The second part of the question about the small parties and the fragmentation of parties is also a very important one. In the previous panel there was some discussion about Israel being the classic illustration of that. In Israel, of course, there's a number of unique situations, including that even smaller parties are able to form coalitions, even though there is a threshold, I believe, of 3.25% in terms of representation. The coalitions then run. You can have a coalition of four or five different parties, and if the coalition receives more votes than the threshold, then each of those very, very small parties that might represent 1% or even less than that, end up having voices in the Knesset.

This leads to problematic outcomes, and I think that would not be a system that would be at all suitable in Canada.

●(1615)

[*Translation*]

Mr. Alain Rayes: Since we spoke about local representation several times, I am not going to go over that again. I am simply waiting for someone to convince me on proportionality.

One expert who spoke, not on the tour, but during the consultations in Ottawa, made a point I found interesting. I think he is the only one to have mentioned this. He cautioned us to be prudent when we talk about better representation of the votes, and to make a distinction between parliamentary representation and representation within government.

I'll explain what I mean. In various proportional models, when attempting to balance things with closed or open lists, the number of seats relates to the percentage of the national vote. For instance, the party that garnered the highest percentage of the vote, let's say 45%, and forms an alliance with a smaller party that obtained 7% or 8% of the vote, then has the majority of seats and takes power. However, a political party that obtained 35% of the vote might not be represented in the government, which ultimately makes the decisions.

I will summarize. That expert was making a distinction between parliamentary representation, that is the number of seats in Parliament, and representation within government. He advised us that if we are really aiming for representation within government, the vocabulary we use when we explain that is perhaps not adequate.

I'd like to hear your comments on that.

The Chair: That is an interesting question, but you've already used up six minutes of your speaking time.

[*English*]

Mr. Majka, could you keep it to 10 seconds?

Mr. Christopher Majka: Very good.

This is an issue that faces all situations where coalition governments arise. You can get strange bedfellows and unusual political alliances. Sometimes one might wonder how just that is. In the end, though, it is an expression of a democracy.

The Chair: Thank you. I'm sorry, but we have to move on.

Go ahead, Ms. Romanado.

Mrs. Sherry Romanado: I'd like to thank our three panellists for being here today.

To the members of the audience, thank you so much for being here. It is my first time in Halifax, and it's a delight to be here.

I just want to get some clarity on your proposal. My colleague talked about the difficulty in recruiting candidates. How would your system impact people who possibly would want to run while knowing that, (a), you may win but you may lose, and (b), if you, heaven forbid, want to run where there is a stronghold, the likelihood of your getting elected is still very slim? For instance, if you are a Green Party candidate and you want to run in Alberta, the likelihood of you winning, even in your system, is very slim.

Trying to convince someone to run in a stronghold is hard enough without telling them, "You might actually win. You might get the most amount of votes, but because of the regionality of it, we'll take that win away."

Could you elaborate on that?

Mr. Matt Risser: I wouldn't put it in those terms probably, but okay. The first thing I would say to somebody is that under this system, campaigns would probably be more collegial, simply because you're basically competing in a different way. You're not really out to suppress anybody's vote or beat anybody else. Really, what you're doing is trying to maybe send a positive message to the riding to up your own vote totals.

On the other part of the question, Denis, do you have any thoughts? I confess that I'm stumped.

Mr. Denis Falvey: Well, first of all, you know that any vote that's cast for you will count, which is a benefit. That is to say, it will count to support whatever partisan group you belong to. So you're not precluded, if you were running....

Let me back up. We don't know what would happen in Alberta, because it's always been under first past the post. Once you change that fundamental rule, things change.

●(1620)

Mrs. Sherry Romanado: Okay, but in your system....

For instance, we have strongholds. We all know there are certain strongholds in the country. Some have switched. For instance, Central Nova has historically been a Conservative riding, and in the last election it went to the Liberals. We heard from one citizen, I believe either in Vancouver or Victoria, who stood up and gave us testimony that her child is sad because their candidate never has a chance to win. Every time an election comes around, the child asks, "Mommy, did we win?" and she has to tell her child, no, Hedy Fry won, because she's been there....

Of course we love her to death, but how would you say to somebody who would want to run against an incumbent who has been there for years in a stronghold that they have a shot? Imagine the voters who are in that stronghold who have been hoping, saying this time their vote will count. Well, no, it actually won't count, because the likelihood of your candidate getting elected is still slim at the end of the day.

My flip point to this is with regard to the people who are in that riding who will vote for somebody who is not the stronghold incumbent. If you were to put it against the same current system, they still won't count. Then in fact you're actually strengthening parties, which is what we've heard as a complaint from some people who say the parties have too much power.

In your model, you're actually giving more power to the party and less to the individual candidate. The individual candidate may actually lose, but whatever votes they got went to the central party. If I wanted somebody in my riding to win who had no chance of winning but I still voted for them, the party got my vote, but in my riding itself, I didn't get my candidate. My candidate didn't win.

Wouldn't the same argument apply that we've been hearing about first past the post? I'm playing devil's advocate here.

Mr. Matt Risser: You've made essentially three points, and there are three answers.

We looked at a single vote proportional system to try to triangulate how this might work in Canada. We don't have one here. You're lucky, as the local candidate, if you get above 40% of the vote, let alone above 50%. Once you switch the incentive of the voting system and people have an incentive to go out and vote for the candidate of their choice, knowing that their vote does still count at a regional level—the vote might not count insofar as electing somebody in their local riding, but at the regional level their vote goes to elect someone—then I think you'll see strongholds to a large extent, as we understand them in a first-past-the-post system, obliterated. We tend to impose or transpose what we're used to onto what would be a new system. Everybody's vote is counted in that way.

I forget what your third point was.

Mrs. Sherry Romanado: The third point is that my candidate didn't win. I wanted my candidate A to win in riding X, but candidate A did not win. My vote got counted toward the party regionally, but at the end of the day my MP is still not the person I wanted.

Mr. Matt Risser: Right. I remember the question now.

You're not rewarding parties, because the elections, as they occur, occur the same way. Local candidates can be nominated in the same

way. They run basically in the same way. The only thing you're transferring to the central party, as it were, is the vote to ensure proportionality. There's no party centralization in the way that typically gets talked about with other proportional models, which, to be honest, I don't have an issue with anyway.

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

Thank you to the panel. This has been another interesting discussion.

We can now go straight into the open-microphone session.

We have about 18 people who would like to make comments. The way we operate in the open-mike segment is that we ask that you limit your intervention to two minutes each in order to give everyone a chance to have their say. It has worked pretty much everywhere we've been on this tour. We find that if one is prepared, then two minutes really hits the mark.

I'll have two people at the mikes at a given time. While one person is speaking, the other person can gather their thoughts. Once the person speaking has finished, then we'll ask somebody else to come up to their mike. There are earpieces for anyone who might want to listen to the translation.

We'll start with Mr. Michael Marshall and Mr. Robert Batherson on mikes one and two, please.

Go ahead, Mr. Marshall.

● (1625)

Mr. Michael Marshall (As an Individual): I've come here today, across the big water, to argue against alternative voting.

Like most people, I think, my life is a series of compromises. I want to go to one movie. My granddaughter wants to go to another. She says, "You like that", but really it's my third choice. I don't like Chinese food. My wife says, "Do you want to go here?" I say yes, but really it's my second choice. My boss wants me to do this. I'd much rather do that. Again, it's a third or fourth choice.

One bloody day every four years I get to walk into a ballot room and I get to cast my vote, "my" vote. It may be for somebody who loses. In fact, in my case, it usually is for someone who loses, for someone who gets a few percentage points, but it is my vote. In this case, I don't have to compromise.

I would like to argue against the alternative ballot in favour of proportional representation. I would envision not too far in the future a Parliament of 400 members, and some party gets one-half of 1% of the vote nationally. Now, strictly proportionately, they get two members, but they really haven't gathered much strength anywhere. I would argue that those voters might well be contented if they had one member like Elizabeth May sitting in Parliament representing their half of 1% across the country.

Yes, it's not proportional—they're getting half of what they should —but because they're so small, I'm saying it's fair. I think even the smallest parties, up to a very low threshold, could be represented by a voice, not a numerically correct voice but a single voice who could be perhaps the one person who says, "Let's not send our troops into Iraq." There's always that one person who history then rewards with hindsight when the 400 other MPs are opposed. I don't think it has to be a very high threshold.

Thanks.

The Chair: Thanks. Good.

Mr. Batherson, please, you have two minutes.

Mr. Robert Batherson (As an Individual): Thank you, Mr. Chair and committee members. I have two points to share with you.

First off, we're in the city of Alexander Keith, and it's his 221st birthday this year. I hope committee members, at the end of a long day of hearings, will partake in a responsible way.

The Chair: We're very grateful for his birth.

Voices: Oh, oh!

Mr. Robert Batherson: It was actually germane to my first point, which is that one of Alexander Keith's truisms was and is to take the time to get it right. I was so pleased in reviewing your mandate to see that you are not bound by a deadline to have a new electoral system in place by October 2019. I know it was in one party's platform, but please take the time to do it right. Take the time to reach out and engage Canadians. Please go forward with a citizens' assembly that is representative, non-partisan, and independent.

All of your witnesses today have been of a certain gender and a certain ethnicity. I'd like to assure those members who are not from Nova Scotia that this is not the face of Halifax. It's not the face of Nova Scotia. I don't see any of our indigenous leaders in the province here. Please do not be boxed in to come forward with recommendations on an electoral system unless you take the time to get it right.

Second, we need a referendum. Why do we need a referendum? Because it's the Canadian way. That's how we do things in Canada. It's the Canadian way. Why do I know it's the Canadian way? Because in Ontario it was done in 2007 following a citizens' assembly. In British Columbia it was done in 2004 following a citizens' assembly, and it was done again in 2009. It was done in Prince Edward Island in 2005, and we're having a plebiscite right now on five options for electoral reform. If we can do it in British Columbia, if we can do it in Ontario, if we can do it in Prince Edward Island, we can certainly do it at the national level.

Finally, in Canada we have not been awash in direct democracy at the federal level. We've had only three national referendums in the history of this country. In 1898 there was a referendum on prohibition—and Alexander Keith's. In 1942, there was a referendum on conscription. In 1992 there was a referendum on a constitutional amendment. In only one of those were women and indigenous people allowed the right to vote. Certainly we can have a national referendum where all Canadians get to have their say.

Thank you very much.

● (1630)

The Chair: Thank you.

Go ahead, Ms. Wear.

Ms. Deirdre Wear (As an Individual): Hi there. I've come a great distance at a risk to my health to be here to speak to you today because it's very important. I would like to request that you all put away your tablets and your phones and at least pretend to care what we say.

Good afternoon. My name is Deirdre Wear and I'm a resident of Cumberland County in Nova Scotia. I'm here today because I'm 57 years old and I've voted in every election since I came of age. The only time my vote has been represented in office was the one time I held my nose and voted strategically against my conscience and my values.

I have lived in Canada's largest city, a small city, and now a hamlet. I have never had an MP who represented my values. In fact, the last time I went to speak with my MP, it was about this very issue. When I told him about feeling disenfranchised by our electoral system, he smirked and told me that my problem is not first past the post, but that I do not support the Conservatives. I left his office feeling disrespected and even more disenfranchised. No Canadian should feel left out of the process if we are to claim that we are a democratic nation.

I have no fear of minority governments, as they encourage co-operation and consensus. False majorities caused by first past the post result in absolute power going to a party that does not have the support of the majority of Canadians. We end up with the latest government in power spending most of its time undoing the actions of the previous government and not making any real progress.

Three of the parties represented here today promised electoral reform in the last federal election campaign. The one that did not was benefiting at the time from a false majority under first past the post. The members of that party may have changed their tune since this is now to their detriment. Likewise, the party now benefiting from first past the post may be reconsidering.

I'm begging all of you here today to help Canada grow up and create a true democracy instead of just maintaining the illusion of one.

The Chair: Thank you.

Ms. Elizabeth May: Mr. Chair, could I just make a small point?

I just want Ms. Wear and anyone else in the audience to know that I'm tweeting this live. I didn't put my BlackBerry down because I wanted to share what you had to say with everyone who is following these hearings and is not here. It was very powerful. Thank you.

I'm sorry, Mr. Chair. I didn't mean to interrupt.

The Chair: That's all right. It's a worthwhile clarification.

We'll go to Shauna Wilcox now, please.

Ms. Shauna Wilcox (As an Individual): Greetings, and thank you for the opportunity to speak today. I'm a proud member of Unifor Local 4600, which represents 1,300 members in Cape Breton, and I'm here today to speak on electoral reform.

I believe it's the single most important issue to be addressed in Canadian democracy, and the time and opportunity for change is now. You have been given the task to hear from Canadians on this issue, and if you fail to take this opportunity, it will be a long time before these conditions come around again.

In Cape Breton—Canso, the area which I live in, the political outcome of the last election didn't reflect the wishes of the voters. We had close to 26% of the votes that were not represented in the legislature because they did not go to the winning candidate. Our first-past-the-post system does a bad job of translating the votes of Canadians into a distribution of seats that matches the preference of voters. Instead, it produces distorted outcomes and wasted votes and contributes to disengagement. We need more reasons for young people and all of those who have been alienated from politics to engage and participate.

My union Unifor has deliberately avoided focusing on detailed models to replace first past the post. At our national convention in August of this year, we overwhelmingly endorsed electoral reform as a proportional system that allocates seats in our Parliament in a way that gives weight to every vote. We expect this committee to reach a consensus and to recommend a system that is understandable to our members and to our community. Unifor doesn't want a referendum or another process that will make proportional voting impossible in the next election.

In closing, along with my union, I am calling for a new electoral system where we maintain a local representative, where every vote counts, and where our politicians are elected in proportion to the votes received. Thank you.

● (1635)

The Chair: Thank you.

Ms. Jessica Smith, go ahead.

Ms. Jessica Smith (As an Individual): Thank you for this opportunity to speak before the committee.

My name is Jessica Smith. I'm here today on behalf of myself and Unifor Local 4606, where I represent 1,300 members predominantly in long-term care here in the HRM and the surrounding area.

We feel very strongly about the need for electoral reform, and it is not only us but also Canadians from coast to coast. In our last election, every party but the Conservatives ran on a platform of electoral reform, because first past the post simply doesn't work. We are one of the few remaining countries with this broken system.

Last fall, in my own riding of Sackville—Preston—Chezzetcook, 52% of the votes went unrepresented, with 72% actually participating. That's a large number. Not only were our votes unrepresented, but many of us also had to choose to vote strategically instead of the party that normally reflects our own beliefs.

This is an amazing time in our country. We have the opportunity to improve our democratic system. We want a government where every vote counts. We want a government to be formed in proportion to the numbers of votes cast per party. We want a government that continues to have local representation. We want a government that encourages co-operation in Parliament to help truly reflect the diversity of Canada.

I also urge you not to go to a referendum, but instead to propose a mandate. As I said before, almost all parties campaigned on electoral reform and making every vote count. Please do it the way New Zealand did. Try it out for a few elections, and then, if we feel we need a referendum, do one then.

I had the opportunity to attend a town hall on electoral reform in my district this last week. Many people didn't understand the systems, even after two hours of our discussing them. I implore you to be the leaders in this and make proportional representation, with local representation, happen.

Thank you very much for your time.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Alain Rayes: Mr. Chair, on two or three occasions citizens spoke about the New Zealand model, and they said that a referendum was held after the voting system was changed. However, it is important to point out that two referendums were also held before the change was made. People forgot to mention that fact several times.

[*English*]

The Chair: I guess what Mr. Rayes is saying is that we should note that New Zealand did have referenda before they changed, as well as after.

Yes, Mr. Cullen.

Mr. Nathan Cullen: Far from a point of order, Chair, we had briefly discussed having more interaction during the open-mike time.

The Chair: I don't want to go down that road.

Mr. Nathan Cullen: Either we do or we don't. We've heard many people come forward and say things that we have opinions on or want to add to what the public say in their brief two minutes. I think it's best if as a committee we simply take it rather than try to intervene and tell the public what we think.

The Chair: Yes. We're not going to make a practice of intervening.

Mr. Nathan Cullen: If there's a point of order, fine, but not if there's some sort of intervention or something that—

Ms. Elizabeth May: Unless we really want to.

The Chair: In my humble opinion, when I heard it, I thought the same thing, so in the interest of factual, historical accuracy, I let that one go.

That said, I'll keep your point in mind, Mr. Cullen, for the future.

Mr. William Zimmerman (As an Individual): I think the fact is wrong. I think there were two referenda prior to the adoption.

The Chair: That's what we just said, yes.

Mr. William Zimmerman: There were two prior and one after.

The Chair: Right. Okay.

Mr. Zimmerman, you have two minutes, please.

Mr. William Zimmerman: I would hypothesize that one of the biggest electoral reforms ever to happen in this country was giving women the vote in 1918. It doubled the number of people voting in the next election. In that next election, we ended a 50-year period in Canada of essentially a two party system, where we alternated between parties. That was the first election, in 1921, in which a viable third option was presented. Since then we have seen that develop into more and more parties. How many parties were there in the last election? There were probably 20 actual parties. Not just three, four, or five, but almost 20 parties had candidates running.

I would suggest that one of the reasons this happened is that with women beginning to vote, we ceased to have battles purely for dominance in elections. We actually had people who came forward wanting to advance other causes and improve the way the country worked. It wasn't just, "You're in and we're out."

I asked somebody in a fairly high position in a political party in this province, while I was covering a meeting in Halifax for CBC, if they could explain the real difference between the Liberal Party and the Conservative Party. His answer was this: "They're in and we're out." The fact is that if elections are simply a battle for dominance, then the two party system and first past the post works, but when we start talking about more complex ideas, we need to have a more complex electoral system. I would argue that proportional representation is an essential part of that.

I'm not supposed to ask you questions, but how many of you are familiar with the book *Tragedy in the Commons*? I think it's very important to realize that there are multiple functions of a member of Parliament. Very often, members from the backbench have found their sole expression in terms of doing constituency work. That's a valuable thing, and that's one of the reasons we want to have local representation. I go to my MP periodically and talk to him about what I think should be happening, and I get a blank stare because it doesn't correspond with what he wants to happen. I don't feel I'm being adequately represented, and I think it's important for us to be adequately represented.

Thank you.

● (1640)

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Go ahead, Mr. Howard Epstein.

Mr. Howard Epstein (As an Individual): Thank you very much. As you know, of course, you're dealing with a complex and multi-faceted exercise to strengthen democratic institutions, of which the voting system is one very important aspect.

I'm a retired lawyer. I am also retired from teaching law part-time at Dalhousie University's law school, but probably more directly relevant to your quest is the fact that I have been elected seven times in central Halifax, twice to city council and five times as a provincial MLA. My party is the NDP. I'm not here on behalf of the provincial party, let alone the federal party, which has its own representatives.

Given my electoral experience, I have benefited from single member plurality voting. I have, however, no strong attachment to it. I support moving to mixed member proportional representation in some form. The central reason is that citizens have more communities of interest than their geographic location. Single member plurality voting does not account for that, whereas mixed member proportional representation does.

If we move to a different system, we're likely to have a more diverse and therefore more representative House of Commons. At the same time, MPs need to be accountable to citizens, and a geographic tie is an efficient and easily understood way to achieve that. Hence, MMPR combines party affiliation with a geographical link.

I want to offer two examples of the general problem with the existing system.

In the Nova Scotia provincial election of 1945, of the 30 seats in the legislature, 28 were won by the Liberal Party, and two were won by the CCF in very feisty ridings in Cape Breton. The point is that the Conservative Party, with some 30% or 40% of the vote, I believe, won zero seats.

The other more recent example, of course, is the complete exclusion of any party except the Liberals in Atlantic Canada. Of the criticisms that are sometimes directed towards proportional representation, the chief one seems to be that it tends to produce minority governments. Having sat through a number of minority governments, I have no problem with them. They can, in fact, be quite flexible.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Go ahead, Ms. Nan McFadgen.

Ms. Nan McFadgen (As an Individual): My name is Nan McFadgen and I am the president of CUPE Nova Scotia. CUPE Nova Scotia represents more than 18,000 front-line public sector workers in education, health care, elder care, child care, municipal government, community services, transportation, and post-secondary education. I want to thank the committee for the opportunity to speak.

I feel that Canada's current electoral system of first past the post needs to change. We can't continue to have political parties get a majority of seats when they only get a minority of the votes. Too many people feel that their vote doesn't count and that their opinions don't matter. Fewer and fewer people are getting out to vote. I don't see this as being good for our democracy.

We support a move to proportional representation. Proportional representation would ensure that the proportion of seats the party gets in the House of Commons is about the same as the proportion of the votes it received. This to me seems fair. Many countries, as many have said, already have proportional representation. These include Scotland, Wales, New Zealand, and Germany.

A new system needs to keep a connection to our local MPs. People need to feel that someone represents them and their community. Mixed member proportional representation would make sure we keep a connection to an MP like we have now and a fair proportion of overall seats. It would mean one ballot and two votes. One vote would go to elect an MP and the other vote would go to elect a party.

We feel mixed member proportional representation is the best solution to encourage greater democratic participation by voters and a fair result at the polls.

● (1645)

The Chair: Thanks very much.

We'll hear from Marlene Wells.

Ms. Marlene Wells (As an Individual): My name is Marlene Wells. I came here today from Stellarton in Pictou County, Nova Scotia.

The first-past-the-post system was designed and adopted a bit haphazardly before there was even reference to political parties. When we started voting, it was a simple "us against them" system designed by honourable men who represented their constituents. Since that time, we have evolved into more complex people who have diverging views on most issues, but we have a common goal to do better for our electorate.

Everything else in our society has evolved. Women have the right to vote. LGBTQ people have marital equality. We get news in real time through sources like Twitter. In municipal elections this year I can vote by Internet or by telephone. I can communicate with my family all over the country in real time, face to face. We also have people living in space. All of these things are life-changing events for the betterment of our Canadian values, representing all of our Canadian values.

With 19 political parties registered in Canada representing the entirety of Canadian values, shouldn't all of the votes for all of those parties count in an election, and the resulting Parliament be elected for the people by the people? Proportional representation is the only way we can ensure that every vote counts.

The evolution of the Canadian polity requires an evolution of our electoral system. Now is the time, and you have the baton.

I have been working very hard to get people out to your committee meetings over the past couple of months, through phone calls, Twitter, and email. Along the way, I've been asking people to thank you for your service. I am humbled to stand before you today and thank you in person. Thank you for taking on this mammoth task. Thank you for enduring your gruelling schedule. Thank you for criss-crossing our amazing country and listening to people like me. Thank you from the bottom of my political junkie heart.

The Chair: Thank you for your kind words. Thank you very much.

Mr. Stephen Chafe, go ahead.

Mr. Stephen Chafe (As an Individual): I want to keep my comment fairly brief. Thank you for letting me speak tonight.

There was mention earlier of no perfect system. I would disagree. I would say there is a sixth option to what has been discussed here.

I would probably have liked to make a larger presentation to the audience and the group here at the moment, but I didn't really come prepared for that today. I came to ask a question.

Over the course of these discussions has there been any consideration for the idea of an interactive democracy in this country? We are talking a lot about proportional representation, but there are other options from a democratic point of view that don't seem to have been considered or put on the table.

One idea I had is called the 30-30-30 system, but I won't go into the details of it right now. Suffice it to say, it would leave the system as it is now, but insert a layer in between the voters and the existing parliamentary system whereby voters could influence what their individual representatives vote for through micro-referendums. This would get around some of the issues of partisan politics as well as a few other things that were mentioned here today and are considered roadblocks to the whole process.

● (1650)

The Chair: I would encourage you, if you could put your thoughts down in less than 3,000 words—

Mr. Stephen Chafe: I can definitely do that.

The Chair: You can send it to the committee. It will be translated and put on the website. Anyone can do this, of course. Also, there is an electronic questionnaire on the website. Friday is the deadline for submitting a brief, as I suggested, and for answering the electronic questionnaire, but it's only Monday so there's still time. Oh, it's Tuesday. It's true that we have been travelling quite a bit. It's Tuesday, but there are still three days left to do that.

Ms. Elizabeth May: If it's Halifax, it must be Tuesday.

The Chair: Yes.

I would encourage you to do that, Mr. Chafe.

Mr. Stephen Chafe: Thank you very much, sir.

The Chair: Is Mark Cunningham here?

A voice: He had to leave.

The Chair: He had to leave. Okay.

Go ahead, Ms. Suzanne MacNeil.

Ms. Suzanne MacNeil (As an Individual): Thank you so much.

My name is Suzanne MacNeil. I'm president of the Halifax-Dartmouth and District Labour Council, representing 25,000 unionized workers across all sectors and in multiple unions across the Halifax regional municipality.

I'm here to put in a word for some system of proportional representation as we consider electoral reform. The bottom line that I want to bring from our workers is that the system we have now needs change. We inherited first past the post from colonial Britain. A few things have changed in our country since 1867.

We would suggest that we're not necessarily married to any one system or another of proportional representation. We do have a number of good things to say about the mixed member representation, but our main point here is that no party should be able to win a majority of seats without a majority of votes.

The second point is that any electoral reform must include some system of proportionality. In a number of the discussions about electoral reform across this country, we've also heard about alternative voting or ranked balloting. Our concern is that this could actually compound some of the problems we have with our current system of first past the post. We would urge the committee to consider that as something that's not desirable.

The other thing I want to emphasize is that as district labour councils, we do a lot of grassroots work in our community. One of the biggest things we hear workers and their families and citizens in general say about the voting process is that they're worried that they're going to waste their vote. There's a really big psychological disincentive toward voting for someone who you think won't get in. Or there might be strategic considerations. Oftentimes we try to argue with people that, no, it is their democratic right to vote for who they want, but our system still really provides a counter to that argument that we try to make.

I would draw your attention to the results of our last election, in which nine million votes did not contribute to electing someone. That's nine million wasted votes. That's the population of the prairie provinces and the Atlantic combined.

Thanks.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Mr. Thomas Trappenberg, please.

Mr. Thomas Trappenberg (As an Individual): Hello. My name is Thomas Trappenberg. I am a professor at Dalhousie University. I'm also the interim leader of the Green Party of Nova Scotia.

I've run as a candidate over the last 10 years in all provincial and federal elections but one. One of the nice little comments I always get goes like this: "I really like your ideas. Elizabeth is wonderful. I would vote for you, if you would win." I get this really often in one form or another.

As you've probably noticed, I grew up in Germany, where one of the most modern electoral systems was forced on us. Luckily it worked out quite well. We already had a democratic system, but we learned that actually a threshold is very useful. I would recommend, from the discussion this morning, that it shouldn't be too high. I think 5% turned out quite well. If you cut out below 10%, you're really cutting out important voices. That's one of the things I would recommend. I did choose this country, because quite frankly, it's just awesome. It is wonderful. But we're getting behind. We have an old electoral system. Its roots are probably 200 years old. Times have

changed, and we have to respond to that. Our system at the moment cuts this out.

Finally, there's a lot of discussion that lists are not good. Actually, in Germany we could all get behind the people we liked to see in government. Even if they were living in Saanich—Gulf Islands, they could still represent me and my concerns, my voice, here in Nova Scotia. So the mixed member proportional turned out actually quite nicely.

It's good to have a list. We had good, strong people who were not re-elected in the last election here. That was really a shame. They had contributed a lot to our government and to our country. I think it would be good to have a list so that we could still have faces from our province.

Thanks.

● (1655)

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Go ahead, Mr. David Blackwell.

Mr. David Blackwell (As an Individual): Thank you.

I'll be very brief, hopefully within the two minutes.

In response to earlier remarks made here within the hour, I'd like to say, very bluntly, that I oppose any referendum, at least until down the road, and then if desirable, clearly desirable. Because of the hesitation of many Canadians to change what they already know, and the need to better understand what a reformed voting method would mean in practice, I suggest adopting the recommendation of the 2004 Law Commission of Canada report that a parliamentary committee review the new electoral rules after three elections have been conducted under these new rules.

I have just one other thing, and it probably doesn't even need saying. I'm not speaking as a Fair Vote Canada representative, but having studied their website material and supporting documentation, I sincerely hope—I'm sure I don't need to say this—that the committee will give Fair Vote Canada's submission to this committee the serious attention it deserves.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Mr. Michael McFadden, please go ahead.

Mr. Michael McFadden (As an Individual): I have voted in every election since I was able to vote, sometimes from places like the middle of the Mediterranean with the Canadian Armed Forces. I have never elected my particular candidate to become a member of Parliament, an MLA, or whatnot. However, I have never wasted my vote. I have voted.

Whatever we do, select a made-in-Canada approach to a proportional voting system. Many good ideas have come out here. We might have to mix and match. I hope you will not consider all of them as separate entities but as something to together make a Canadian solution.

Don't be afraid of a detailed system. Canadians can handle any system, with proper education. We're not dumb...well, maybe I am. Consider mandatory voting with time off guaranteed, without penalty, so the person can vote. Start education early, at the elementary school level. You want to develop in that person, when they get up to the age of majority and can vote, a feeling of obligation and responsibility so that it is absolutely natural for them to vote and unnatural for them not to vote.

A proportional system, in my viewpoint, will encourage a more productive and truly Canadian government, i.e., co-operative. Consider the independent member. How do we fit that into a proportional system? As part of it, and I'm not sure if it's the mandate, can we control campaign spending and allow all voices to be heard, with air and other media time?

Thank you.

● (1700)

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Ms. Kim Vance.

Ms. Kim Vance (As an Individual): Thank you.

My name is Kim Vance. I'm not here to represent anyone. I'm here as a mom. I'm also here as someone who works in the field of international human rights and as a dyed-in-the-wool maritimer.

As a mom, I'm very worried about the low participation of youth in the political process, extremely worried. As the mom of a daughter who's of African-Nova Scotian descent, I'm also worried that time after time she sees nobody who looks like her from this region going to Parliament. She also sees nobody who looks like her in the current makeup of the cabinet. As much as I'm appreciative of the current Prime Minister for gender parity in the cabinet, it is a one-off act, not an institutional step that this government is taking. We need more institutional steps, like proportional representation.

On the international front, I'm embarrassed actually when I do human rights work and people talk about how great Canada is. That waned a little bit in the last 10 years. It's getting better again, but it stands in stark contrast to where we rank, for instance, on the role of women in the democratic processes in our country. We're very low, and that is unacceptable for a country that goes out and hallmarks itself as a beacon of human rights.

As a maritimer, I cannot imagine a more troubling situation than the one we're in right now. Three out of our four federal parties have no representative, no voice from our region. This cannot happen. Even though I may not support those other three parties, I still think it's important that our voices are in those caucuses. It's essential. I can't imagine a situation where the next time around, if we have a different government, that government has had an absence of perspective from this entire region of the country for four years, eight years, or whatever. That is unacceptable, and proportional representation is the answer to that.

I disagree with some of the other people who have spoken today. I do think you have to act quickly. I think you can get it right in a tight timeline. I have listened a lot to the committee deliberations, and I have read a lot of material. Other than getting rid of first past the post and moving to some system of proportional representation, I don't

think there's a lot of strong debate about what the options are. I think you can act. I think you can act quickly and act on an option that works.

The Chair: Very good.

We'll have Mr. David Barrett.

Mr. David Barrett (As an Individual): My name is Dave Barrett. I have been a Nova Scotian all my life. I'm 78 years old, so what you do doesn't really make any difference to me.

I have always been interested in politics. I took civics at school. They don't teach it anymore. Something is wrong there. I have seen countries, mainly in Africa, but others too that had democracies which disappeared.

We have a great country here, and it has been 150 years. I consider that we are one of the greatest countries in the world. If you start changing the electoral system, then that makes for dictatorships. When I have voted, sometimes my party went in and sometimes it didn't, but I have always felt that I was represented because the people who are elected by first past the post are basically the best people in that area. I've always felt that I could go to them and discuss things.

I also think that to have credibility you have to have a referendum. We're from Nova Scotia. Things get done behind closed doors in Ottawa and Toronto, Ontario. It happens every day. We just know it. You have to have a representative here.

Every time you vote it's important, and first past the post is something that has been accepted in Canada and has worked. You have so many different things on the table. We all have our problems.

I didn't vote for Elizabeth May, but I'm pleased she got elected, and because our media takes into consideration her vote, they gave her the thing. The minority people do have a representative and they get represented a lot.

I only have a few things to say, but referendum is one of them, and for goodness sake make sure the Maritimes is represented, not like that judge that they were going to kick out and not have anyone from Nova Scotia. That's just wrong.

● (1705)

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

We have Mr. Brian Gifford.

Mr. Brian Gifford (As an Individual): Good afternoon.

I thank you very much for this opportunity. I'm here because I feel so strongly about this. It's fundamental to fairness and to our democracy that we make a change to the system.

I've lived in Nova Scotia most of my life but I've also lived in other parts of Canada. I have relatives in Montreal, Toronto, rural Ontario, rural Manitoba, small-town B.C., and small-town Alberta. Our family is a pan-Canadian family.

I favour mixed member proportional as the best system. We need to maintain that strong local representation and people need to feel a connection to Parliament. We have huge geographic diversity and diverse political cultures across the country—I know that from my own family's experience—but we also need to accurately reflect the political views that have been expressed nationally. This is where, of course, we're failing so badly. Non-geographic seat distribution by party seats that reflect the popular vote is an essential element of the new system that is going to be devised.

I wish you all the best in coming up with a good system. I hope it's mixed member proportional or something very close to that...in your brilliance.

In response to Alistair's question about diverse candidates, I do think that mixed member proportional with the list being part of the system will enable a greater diversity among the people who are in Parliament as well.

Thank you very much for this opportunity.

The Chair: Thank you.

We've had wonderful witnesses and a great audience with really good commentary.

The committee is going to take a break for about an hour. We'll be back at 6:15 and we'll see you then.

● (1705)

_____ (Pause) _____

● (1815)

The Chair: The meeting is under way. We have a great panel tonight.

Representing the Springtide Collective, we have Mark Coffin, executive director. From Fair Vote Nova Scotia, we have Andy Blair, president. Appearing as an individual, we have Larry Pardy.

Each witness has five minutes to present. We'll get going right away with Mr. Coffin kicking off the evening.

Go ahead, sir.

● (1820)

Mr. Mark Coffin (Executive Director, Springtide Collective): Thank you for inviting me to speak with you this evening. I'm eager to talk about this topic. It's one that I'm fairly passionate about.

I'll tell you a little bit about myself before I start sharing some of my thoughts on electoral reform.

I'm a Cape Bretoner at heart. I've been living in Halifax for the last 10 years, which is longer than I've lived anywhere else. I'm a marine biologist by training and an educator by calling or vocation. I dropped out of teacher's college because it was easier to start an organization that teaches civics than to become a civics teacher in Nova Scotia.

Now I run the Springtide Collective. We're an organization that is dedicated to bridging the gap between Nova Scotians and our democratic institutions. The way we do that is through education, public engagement, and research. We're weighing in on this topic because we thought it would be of benefit to share some insights in terms of how alternate electoral systems could work in Canada with Canadians. We're extending our reach for this particular issue.

We've written a paper called "Better Choices: Voting System Alternatives for Canada". Unfortunately, we didn't write it fast enough to have it translated for the committee, but there are copies here in English for those who would like them.

I won't get into detail on that, but one of the things we do at Springtide is we try to fill a role somewhere between academics, who generally have a fairly accurate grasp of how complex systems such as our electoral system work, and lay people. We know that academics can talk in really robust and accurate language. At the other end of the spectrum there are people who work in politics, who often have an agenda and can talk in very pointed, specific, and persuasive language. We're trying to do what academics often don't spend as much time doing, which is to put their work into plain language.

I thought that with my brief time of unrestricted comments before we get into questions I'd share just a few ideas that I have, or a few tidbits of information, as someone who has observed the electoral reform debate in Canada. As an educator, I feel compelled to weigh in on it at this point.

The first point I'll make is that, because I'm trained as a scientist, I look at information with a bit more scrutiny than I think perhaps people in the social sciences have done. I look at information on electoral systems, and I see that the best, most statistically sound and robust data and research on electoral systems and governmental systems generally concludes that the benefits lie with proportional representation. The least robust, the most suspect evidence or research that seems based mostly on conjecture or hypotheses that have been long proven wrong concludes in an AV or a first-past-the-post system as that having the majority of the benefits.

I say that first because I'm going to say some things that I feel have been misrepresented in the proportional representation argument.

One is that proportional systems give more power to parties. This seems to me about as accurate as saying that wet streets cause rain.

The Chair: Do you mean they don't?

Voices: Oh, oh!

Mr. Mark Coffin: We can get into that in the Q and A.

The only system where parties have more power than proportional systems is the first-past-the-post system. We talk about these lists, and they could be closed lists. The only systems that allow open lists are proportional representation systems. First past the post has an absolutely closed list. Party members get together in gatherings and nominate a candidate, and then, as voters, we are given a closed list. There just happens to be only one person on that list for each party. In proportional systems we have the option to say, "I like this party and this is my favourite candidate in it."

I thought we had 10 minutes, and I know I'm coming up on five.

The Chair: You can keep going.

Mr. Mark Coffin: Sounds good.

The other element of "proportional systems give the party more control" that I find challenging to accept is that proportional systems bring more parties into the mix. On average, any existing party will have less power than they do right now. Some will get more, but on average most will be less powerful. Other parties will weigh in to hold them to account.

The other myth is not so much a myth as a challenging piece of resistance that comes up when people say proportional systems will create a more collaborative politics, or will create politics with more representation of women. Somebody on the devil's advocate side will say, well, if we wanted those things, we could just make them as MPs; or if we wanted those things, as Canadians we could just make that happen and elect more women.

I'll use a story as an analogy to demonstrate why I think this logic is flawed. We've all been in the situation where we've been in a new shower, perhaps in a hotel, where we're waiting for the hot water to come on. We wait and wait and wait. It doesn't come on, so we jam the tap over to the hot side. Then when it starts to warm up, we get in. A few seconds later, we start to burn. We jam it back to the cold side. A few seconds later, it starts to get cold again.

I think the MPs who we all probably agree, at least in public, are part of the problem in creating a toxic environment in the legislature are the ones who are quick to push it to the hot side. They lay on the heat. I couldn't tell whose voice it was earlier, but I was listening to your conversation this afternoon about a group of rookie MPs who decided to sit on their hands. They are the people who are pushing it back to the cold side. Neither approach is actually effective in getting us the politics that is the right temperature for Canada.

The electoral system, I would say, is the plumbing in this analogy, and what we need is more responsive plumbing. We need to be able to put the right amount of input by pushing the tap to where we want it to be and seeing an electoral system that gives us that instead of having this back and forth, now 10 years of Conservatives, now 10 years of Liberals, erasing each other's policies.

If we want to have a more collaborative and intelligent politics in our country, I think one of the ways to do that is to look into unintuitive solutions. Our first response that says, you know, we need a code of ethics for MPs to not do any of these things, and to only do these things, will probably, I think, ignore some of the larger incentives that exist.

The Chair: That was a very interesting analogy.

Mr. Blair, please.

● (1825)

Mr. Andy Blair (President, Fair Vote Nova Scotia): I'll keep it short, and keep the water-based analogies to a minimum too.

Thanks very much for the invitation to present here today. I'm presenting on behalf of Fair Vote Nova Scotia, which is a grassroots multi-partisan association of Nova Scotians concerned about our democracy. While we don't advocate for any specific system or model, we do promote reform based on certain principles.

As has been pointed out many times before, there's no perfect system, only systems that emphasize certain values over others. I think the minister has recognized this and come up with a list of principles against which to measure reforms.

The first amongst these is democratic legitimacy and effectiveness. Any system should produce results that are an accurate and fair reflection of the democratic wishes of Canadians. It should also produce governments that are effective, and encourage government policies that are effective and durable, instead of policies that are reversed after the next election because they don't enjoy the support of a true majority of electors.

The second principle is voter engagement. Any system we use should let every Canadian feel that their vote really counts, and counts toward the election of a representative of their preference. It should incentivize collaboration among political actors and not hinder under-represented groups from participation.

We feel that these principles can best be respected by adding an element of proportionality to our current voting system. This can be done while maintaining strong local representation and direct accountability of MPs to voters. A number of highly proportional systems that accomplish this have been proposed here. You've heard about many of them. Many more will come in the briefs. It's up to you to craft a system that would be well-suited to Canada and recommend it to Parliament. I hope this will be done with an eye to improving some of the more dysfunctional political dynamics set up under our current system.

When I see the partisan incentives and confrontational politics often encouraged by our winner-takes-all system, I see something that holds us back as a nation rather than helping us realize our full potential. It's not who we are. I don't think it suits our character. As often as not, we are conciliators and consensus builders. As an example, on the international stage, Canadians are often referred to as good diplomats and peace brokers. It's who we are, and who we should strive to be.

Moving toward a more proportional, consensus-style system where legislators are encouraged to work across party lines to come to agreements supported by a true majority of voters, where politics is no longer a zero-sum game, I think will have far-reaching, positive impacts on policy-making in Canada.

The committee has a historic opportunity. I'm convinced that future generations looking back will see the decision to move to a more proportional system here—if that is the decision—as no less an advancement for Canada than the adoption of medicare, pensions, or even women getting the vote. It's up to this committee and Parliament to seize this unique opportunity to effect real change.

Thank you.

● (1830)

The Chair: Thank you very much.

We'll now go to Mr. Pardy, please.

Mr. Larry Pardy (As an Individual): Thank you for the opportunity to present to your committee today.

Let me be clear on my perspective on electoral reform. I am unconvinced that adopting proportional representation in Canada would improve our democratic outcomes.

As many witnesses have made clear, there's no single best system. Consequently, the choice of one system over another involves trade-offs. This is particularly true when considering moving from our current first-past-the-post system to a proportional representation system. Adopting PR would certainly improve proportionality, and depending on the specific model could have potential benefits for diversity, but at what cost?

First, I would suggest to you that a majoritarian system, which allows voters to directly impact who forms government, and as importantly, determines when a government should be removed from power, is more democratic than proportional systems where the question of government formation could be left to negotiations among party leaders.

Second, our national unity is better protected under first past the post, which compels parties to take national approaches and soften rhetorical edges in order to maximize appeal to the broad political centre, rather than opting for a PR system, which risks the rise of regional and issue-specific parties that target Canada's historical fault lines: language and regional alienation.

Third, local representation is stronger under a first-past-the-post system, which provides the smallest possible riding size for each MP to represent and thereby maximizes opportunities for contact between voter and representative, than a PR system, which increases riding size.

The Chair: Mr. Pardy, could I ask you to go a little slower for the benefit of the interpreters?

Mr. Larry Pardy: I'm sorry.

The Chair: Thanks.

Mr. Larry Pardy: You said I had five minutes, and I figured I could do it in two and a half.

It thereby maximizes opportunities for contact between voter and representative rather than under a PR system, which increases the riding size in order to accommodate multiple representatives.

Fourth, confidence in our democratic system is enhanced under first past the post when every voter in every riding adheres precisely to the same election rules—single-member plurality support, directly elected, same ballot format, same counting procedure—as opposed to the many models being proposed that would involve different approaches across the country.

As a former resident of Labrador and presently living in the largely rural riding of Cumberland—Colchester, I am particularly sensitive to the question of local representation and the impact of enlarging riding sizes to accommodate proportional representation. PR advocates have claimed that such a change would not undermine representation, since there would be four, five, or six members of Parliament to serve a much larger area. However, if we are retaining the notion of individual MP accountability to the voters, there has to be individual MP responsibility based on individual actions and individual relationships with voters. These would all suffer in the expanded ridings. At a minimum, switching from first past the post to PR would result in less effective local representation, a diminished level of democracy, decreased accountability, a weakening of national parties, and a loss of an electoral system that is consistently applied countrywide.

Beyond these trade-offs, it is also my position that PR will not work in Canada, unless this committee is prepared to explore and define those mechanisms utilized in successful PR countries to achieve stability in government formation, dissolution, and operation. Clearly many countries operate well under PR systems, with Germany in particular offering an apparently successful model.

However, if proposed changes are strictly limited to the voting system, the success of these PR countries would not be adequately replicated in Canada. Canada's conventions and practices for government formation and dissolution are simply not compatible with a government elected under a PR system. The stability of PR governments depends on features such a chancellor's majority, in Germany; constructive votes of no confidence; dissolution powers not held by the prime minister; the head of state, preferably elected, possessing responsibilities for government formation; governments being sworn in after obtaining confidence, not before; and they have coalitions. We have none of these.

Since the King-Byng affair, certain practices and conventions have been strictly and consistently applied in Canada: the party with the most seats on election night is given the opportunity to form the government; governments are sworn into office on this basis, and then proceed to meet Parliament to seek the confidence of the House; Parliament is dissolved any time that the government loses a confidence vote, or at the time of the prime minister's choosing; and the Governor General leaves political decisions to the politicians.

As a consequence, our federal Parliament does not lend itself to coalition governments, to second-place parties being asked to form a government, or to changes of government from one party to another within the same Parliament.

In the absence of formal changes, these mechanisms would remain in effect even if we moved to a PR voting system. This would clearly be a recipe for instability given the frequency of minority governments, yet there has been virtually no discussion regarding the potential changes to our institutions or conventions that would be required in order to effectively switch to a new voting system.

Therefore, my recommendations are, first, to retain the current first-past-the-post system for the positive governance outcomes it has provided to Canadians; and second, if you do offer a PR system, to detail the mechanisms employed by PR countries that we would need to adopt in order to make it function effectively.

Thank you.

●(1835)

The Chair: Thank you very much.

We'll start the round of questions with Mr. DeCourcey.

Mr. Matt DeCourcey: Thank you very much.

Thank you to all three presenters this evening. I'm going to try my best to engage with each one of you.

Mr. Coffin, if I can start with you, take me back to the comments on the open list that you had. You talked about it differing from party nominations.

Could it be argued that party nominations in themselves are one of a two-step approach in an open-list process? I'm maybe challenging or trying to dig into the comment you made there.

Mr. Mark Coffin: Yes, perhaps if I were to try that line—

Mr. Matt DeCourcey: Could you give an analogy about water?

Mr. Mark Coffin: Not yet.

As I see the nomination process, there's no reason that it would change at all in any of the systems I understand the committee to be considering. In any electoral system, the nomination and candidate selection process could be as closed or as open as the party itself decides, with the party being the membership. Then, members in that regional district or in that single-member district would be able to nominate their candidate or candidates.

Mr. Matt DeCourcey: Are you thinking there's a way to have an open nomination followed by an open-list process?

Mr. Mark Coffin: Absolutely. Yes.

You would take the current nomination process, which I understand is virtually identical across parties—with some small differences—and instead of electing one nominee, you would elect several, as members. The next step would be to have an open list in either the MMP or list-PR system, and then give voters in that region the chance to select the candidates of their preference from within the party of their preference.

Mr. Matt DeCourcey: What about the idea of an element of proportionality whereby somebody who ran and wasn't successful was provided the proportional seat because they were the highest—

Mr. Mark Coffin: In dual candidacy...?

Mr. Matt DeCourcey: Effectively there's no list. I'm forgetting the terminology—

Mr. Mark Coffin: Dual candidacy, I think, is the...where you can be on the ballot for a district in an MMP system, but—

Mr. Matt DeCourcey: There's no list. Voters vote once and then the nearest runner-up is able to secure the proportional seat.

Would that be palatable, in your mind, if there was an element of proportionality?

●(1840)

Mr. Mark Coffin: That wouldn't be my personal preference, but I think it could be a very legitimate system if that's the one that were decided upon.

Mr. Matt DeCourcey: Okay. Great.

Mr. Pardy, you mentioned what I think is a psychological barrier that we would have to overcome in moving to a more proportional system; that is, despite the fact that voters vote for a member, it's the collective will of members that determines the government from there. It could be argued that a convention of our system is, in effect, that voters are expressing who they want to choose as government, as opposed to proportional systems that tend to see the parties determine what the government formation will be later on.

Mr. Blair, Mr. Coffin, is that a psychological barrier that you think we would have to work with the Canadian public to overcome?

Whether it's the reality or not, people have the perception that they're expressing their will in terms of who they would like to become government.

Mr. Andy Blair: I think that with the adoption of any new system there's going to have to be a process of education. Elections Canada will have to play a leading role in that to accustom them to the new system. Also, elected members and people running for office will have to inform their party members and their substantial supporters of how things work.

I think that, over time, people will see the truth of the system. If you end up recommending a system that emphasizes party control, then they'll see that. If you don't, then they will see that there's not necessarily any greater level of party control under a PR system than under first past the post. It really depends on the particular system that you choose.

Mr. Mark Coffin: I'm sorry. Are you asking if Canadians will have a challenge accepting that their vote—

Mr. Matt DeCourcey: May not be expressed in a way that chooses government, yes.

Mr. Mark Coffin: I think the short answer is maybe, and then the long answer is maybe, but that's not the most important thing. I may be oversimplifying here, but I feel we've had it easy in Canada until relatively recently when new parties started to emerge and it became apparent that we're more diverse when it comes to political opinion than just left and right and Conservative and Liberal.

In my lifetime, which isn't very long—I'm only 30—my experience has been that, generally, we are getting more diverse, more accepting, and more understanding toward all of the different needs that we have to accommodate when making decisions. Keeping first past the post because it's easier for Canadians to see how they chose their government, which a lot of Canadians would not agree with, is not necessarily the easiest way.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

We'll go to Mr. Richards.

Mr. Blake Richards: Thank you to all of you.

I'll start with you, Mr. Pardy.

You made the comment that proportional representation won't work in Canada. You had a chance to elaborate on that a little bit, but I want to hear a bit more of your thoughts on it.

Obviously, one of the challenges to apply a proportional system to Canada, which is different from many countries that utilize that system, is the large geographic area that we cover. We already have some very large ridings, and when you start to create multi-member ridings or things like that, they can become very difficult. If you have one or two very large communities and a lot of other smaller communities out there, sometimes those smaller communities tend to be ignored, specifically when combining certain ridings. Those are some of the challenges.

Of course, there are some regional differences in Canada as well. You already see the more fringe parties in a lot of countries that utilize a proportional-type system. You've seen neo-Nazi-type parties being elected. There was talk today in the *National Post* about the Pirate Party. It predicts they may win the election in Iceland. It says they would be at a point where they would have to create a coalition government. That was one of the challenges you also raised. Sometimes it takes weeks after an election for coalitions to be formed behind the scenes, in the backrooms. Voters aren't really a part of all that.

Those are some of the challenges you alluded to, but I wanted to hear your thoughts a bit more in terms of what you see as some of the unique challenges in Canada that would mean PR, in your view, wouldn't work for Canada, and why.

●(1845)

Mr. Larry Pardy: The geography is a crucial challenge, as well as the provincial boundaries that we have. A lot of the advocates of proportional representation seem to be willing to offer that there would be exceptions for the very large northern ridings, but as you indicate, as you move further south you start combining ridings.

How big is too big? If you make exceptions for Labrador, the Territories, or the largest ridings in northern B.C. and northern Ontario, when you take the next step down, there are still very large ridings. You combine them to achieve proportionality and you have another problem.

If you look at P.E.I., you're looking at a different scenario. You only have four seats to work with, and as I understand it, proportionality works best with five-plus seats.

In Nova Scotia, the challenge I think you'd have geographically is that you have 40% of the population around the Halifax area. You could probably create a five-member riding right in the Halifax area, but then what do you do for the rest of the province? You would have another five or six ridings, spread out from one end of the province to the other, which I think would be totally unmanageable.

It's the same in Newfoundland and Labrador. You give an exception for Labrador perhaps—I would hope—and then as you move to the island, most of the population is centred on the Avalon Peninsula.

How do you create multi-member ridings that will adequately represent the rural areas of those provinces?

Mr. Blake Richards: I appreciate that point. I look at my home province of Alberta as well, and I look at my riding. It's certainly not a northern riding by any means. It's what we would call central Alberta. In some cases, people might even call it southern Alberta. It's right around the Calgary area. If you were to combine it with a few of the ridings next to it, it would become larger than many of the northern ridings would, so you're going to start creating that problem elsewhere as well.

I wanted to get your thoughts as well on making sure than any suggestions, any recommendations that are made are legitimized by the Canadian public. My view is that the best way to do that is through a referendum. I'm curious as to your thoughts on how we ensure that any changes that are proposed by this committee, and then the government if it follows along with those recommendations, would be legitimate for Canadians. How can the government make sure it has the consent of Canadians to make a change to our electoral system?

Mr. Larry Pardy: I was anticipating that question. I hadn't really come up with a good answer yet. At some point, whatever the committee comes up with, it will require some legitimization for Canadians. I haven't seen anything better at this point than a referendum, while recognizing all the challenges of conducting a referendum and getting a meaningful result and so on. I don't think it's enough, particularly where there are probably going to be differences between the political parties in the House or even on this committee. There's probably not going to be absolute consensus. How do you get to that next step of ensuring that such a fundamental change to our democratic system adequately represents the views of Canadians? A referendum might be the only way.

The Chair: Okay, thank you.

Mr. MacGregor. Go ahead, sir.

Mr. Alistair MacGregor: Thanks.

Mr. Coffin, I'll start with you.

I'm really glad to hear that you have a background as a scientist. My brother is one too, and I understand the close scrutiny part of it. In mixed-member proportional systems that are established in other countries, what have you found the relationship to be like between members of Parliament who are elected from a geographic area versus those from the lists? What are people's perceptions of that relationship? Can you elaborate a bit on that?

● (1850)

Mr. Mark Coffin: I can't say I've done a tonne of research on this. In particular, one of the people I work closely with is Mr. Risser, who is speaking with you this afternoon. On that question I would usually defer to him.

My sense is that it doesn't necessarily create as much inner-party tension as is often theorized. An assessment of what it does for the politics is that it gives relief to some members of Parliament, or of whatever house of assembly it is, because it relieves them of the local constituency duties, which are important but I would say are overrepresented in our current system.

The only people with a responsibility to look out for national or provincial issues are often cabinet ministers, and they don't necessarily get rewarded for that at the polls. If you look at the electoral success of people who have been ministers in subsequent elections, they're often punished for it by voters because they haven't been in the constituency, so I think having some mechanism by which to reward those who focus on more broad policy issues is probably a positive thing. You can get that with the list representatives in an MMP system.

Mr. Alistair MacGregor: I'll open it up to Mr. Blair, also. Do you have opinions on multi-member ridings that are proportional, in which constituents can shop around for the MP who does the best job. For example, I could try going to the Liberal MP, and then I could try going to the Conservative MP, and I could balance both of their work for me because my riding would have five MPs.

Do you have any feedback on that kind of a system?

Mr. Andy Blair: I think that certainly sets up a different dynamic for electors in which they can compare different MPs and the work of those within their own particular riding for multi-member ridings. It also sets up a slightly better system for some people who feel that their MP doesn't really speak for them. I know that every MP tries to represent all constituents in their riding, but if you have a particular viewpoint on health care, the long gun registry, or whatnot, you may have an MP who you feel is basically shutting the door to you. Under a multi-member riding, you could sort of shop around for an MP who is maybe more responsive to what your needs and your concerns are, and would be better able to represent your views in Parliament.

Mr. Alistair MacGregor: Because I'm cognizant of five minutes —and it does run out—I just wanted to address my next question to all three of you. Maybe I'll start with you, Mr. Pardy.

There has been a lot of talk about a referendum in the course of this committee's deliberations, and I think one of the compromises that has been offered is that we write in a sunset clause for the new electoral system that states that a new government must have a referendum after voters have had a chance to try it out. I think that would allow them an informed choice.

I would just like to hear feedback from all three of you on that proposal. It may be a way to bridge the gap between two very polarized positions.

Mr. Larry Pardy: It's an interesting idea. I'm not sure how effective it is given the timing between elections. Perhaps it would be useful, but I don't know if you're going to see the tangible effects of any system until several election cycles anyway. If proportional representation does lead to more parties being represented in the House, and more minorities, that may take a period of time. If the current parties remain fairly strong in the current areas where they're strong right now, it may take a few election cycles before you see the true effect of proportional representation with all the parties that might be represented in the House at some point. At what point do you know that you're getting a true reflection of that system?

The Chair: Thank you.

We'll go to Ms. May now, please.

Ms. Elizabeth May: Thank you.

Thank you to the witnesses for being here tonight.

To start with, Mr. Pardy, it's very easy to categorize proportional representation as if it's one thing, but the more we dig into it here, for instance.... I'm not quibbling with you, although I have one tiny little quibble. You said you live in Cumberland—Colchester. I hate to correct you, but you live in the riding of Cumberland—Colchester—Musquodoboit Valley. Talk about a large riding, it extends from the boundaries of Halifax all the way to the New Brunswick border.

There are also PR systems that would work just with the boundaries of the one riding you're in now. There is another version that.... We've been pitched a whole bunch of different ideas, and one of them would be to have riding twins. You would have two ridings together, but you'd have two MPs for that riding.

There are an almost infinite number of variables to make sure that we have a system that works for Canada. Do you think you are open to persuasion? For instance, if this committee came to a consensus agreement that gave us a made-in-Canada solution that addressed the concerns you have, do you think that's something that would be of interest to people like you who are quite skeptical about the PR systems they've heard about that have party lists, expand the power of parties, or create lots of additional parties? We have lots of evidence that those things are not embedded in moving to proportional representation, depending on the system we choose.

●(1855)

Mr. Larry Pardy: Just like the difference between proportional representation, and the variations of it, and first past the post, it involves trade-offs. Within all of those options you talk about that are available, there are trade-offs as well.

I guess I direct my concerns at proportional representation in a very general way, based on most of the suggestions that have been made. Of course, I would be open to a system that addressed those concerns, but I haven't seen it yet, because the more proportionality you want, the larger the ridings are probably going to have to get.

Ms. Elizabeth May: That's the interesting thing. That's true sometimes, but not always. We've had presentations on truly proportional, completely proportional systems where riding boundaries don't change at all. The weighting of the votes changes, in terms of how the MPs vote in the House. That's an example I don't think we'll end up recommending, but there is a range here that is almost infinite. Every time we go to a new city and think we've heard of every possible proportional representation system you could possibly imagine, there is a new one.

There are a lot of different variables in play, and we want to make sure—at least I do—that there is a local representative, so people know who their local MP is, and that we have proportionality. With those two principles in my mind, I can see, at this point, at least four workable options for Canada, and none of them involve more party power. They involve more citizen power.

I will turn to Andy Blair, because he says that Fair Vote Nova Scotia doesn't have a position on a proportional representation system. Can I ask you personally? Do you have a personal favourite that you are hoping we'll look at?

Mr. Andy Blair: No, I'm actually pretty agnostic. Whether it's the STV system that was voted upon in the B.C. referendum or MMP, as recommended in the 2004 Law Commission report, those would work, and others. I'm sure you could pick and choose the mechanisms and the values that you want and construct a system that actually works, out of those from Canada. You've heard of many systems here, and I know that you'll be hearing from the executive director of Fair Vote Canada later in the month. They will present yet another system. There are quite a few different ways to do it. There are lots of options to pick and choose the principles and values that you want to promote.

Ms. Elizabeth May: One of the things we have found from academics, which is obvious when you think about it but I hadn't turned my mind to it, is that Canada is something of an anomaly among the first-past-the-post countries, in that, since 1921, we've had multiple parties in our Parliament. We've had four to five

through history. The four or five parties that come up will change. We've had farmer parties, progressive parties, and all kinds of regional split parties. Over the last almost 100 years, we have not been a two-party system, but we've had a two-party voting system.

Mark, your comment was that saying that proportional representation will favour party power is like "saying that wet streets cause rain". I think that was it. Do you have anything else to add on this question, before my time runs out? Does the proportional representation system promote party power? You've obviously said it doesn't. Do you want to expand on why that is?

Mr. Mark Coffin: Again, you said there are an infinite number of proportional systems that we could have. There are two winner-take-all systems that I think are being seriously considered: alternative vote and first past the post. There's not much that you can do other than change the borders.

One point I will make on party power is that we often talk about it as if it is a horrible thing. When I think of party power, in the best-case scenario, it is members getting together and making decisions. That's something that you try to control in any system, and if we adopt an open-list PR system and focus on democratizing political parties, I don't think that would be a bad thing.

●(1900)

The Chair: Thank you.

Ms. Sahota.

Ms. Ruby Sahota: Mr. Pardy, I'd like to ask you questions surrounding stability. We've heard on both sides of the picture that some people are saying PR systems create more stability, because you have coalition governments and you don't have this back and forth of undoing things that the previous government has done. Then there has been criticism that PR systems are unstable because you would have minority governments, and those kinds of comments.

I have read some comments you've made in the past that in order to have stability, if you were under a PR system, there are other changes we'd have to make so that we wouldn't have Parliament dissolving and we wouldn't have constant elections.

What are some of those changes we would have to adopt in our Canadian parliamentary system?

Mr. Larry Pardy: Well, as I indicated earlier, things like a chancellor's majority in Germany would clearly achieve greater stability or constructive...as opposed to no confidence.

First of all, coalitions themselves are a key part of providing stability, and we don't have that right now. I think it's one of the misconceptions that if you adopt PR you're going to end up with coalitions. I suggest that coalitions arise when parties have to obtain the confidence of the House before they're sworn into government. We have the opposite here. In Canada, we choose either that the prime minister continues on as the government and swears in his new cabinet, or he resigns following the election and the second-most popular party takes power and is sworn in. It's only after that that we have a Speech from the Throne and the prime minister is in power for a period of time. Then finally, several months later, we test the confidence of the House.

By doing it in that fashion, you don't get coalition governments, and that's why we haven't had any. We're not going to naturally evolve into having coalition governments just because we adopt a system that creates more minority parliaments.

Ms. Ruby Sahota: What are some places in the world that you think have that balance right and have made the proper adjustments?

Mr. Larry Pardy: I think there are a lot of PR countries that probably do have it right. I know one that's cited quite a bit is New Zealand. It's compared a lot to Canada, because we're both Westminster systems and stuff like that. At the same time, they have a couple of mechanisms that we don't have.

There, it was really ironic. The governor general of the day, recognizing that they were changing to a PR system and that they were going to have minority parliaments, did some research and then came to the conclusion that he would assess whether or not the parties had sufficient members, or a coalition, to control Parliament. Rather than following the system that we do now, that they did in the past, all of a sudden he took it upon himself...which is really bizarre. I can't imagine we would ever allow our Governor General to take on such a political action.

Since they have adopted PR, from that point forward, their governor general receives proposals from the parties as to which one can control the parliament, and they proceed on from there. As well, they do allow the parliament to continue even when there is the loss of a confidence vote, which we don't have. Our prime ministers get to dissolve Parliament at that point. Also, the New Zealanders have a three-year life cycle for their parliament. That sort of negates the need for voting down a government, except in the most dire circumstance. It also means that the party in power somewhat restricts themselves in the measures they take, because they know they're facing the electorate fairly soon afterwards.

There are quite a few differences between their system and ours as to how it has evolved since they adopted proportional representation.

Ms. Ruby Sahota: Interesting.

You work in Aboriginal Affairs. We've been talking a lot about representation, and that they're not well represented in Parliament.

We've been making inroads, but we aren't there. Do you have any opinions on that?

● (1905)

Mr. Larry Pardy: I don't think I'm in a position to speak to that. I'm here just as an individual and I believe my work is totally separate.

Ms. Ruby Sahota: Fair enough.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Cullen.

Mr. Nathan Cullen: Thank you, Chair.

I'm a bit confused with that.

On that last interaction about the Governor General, I'm reminded of the letter that Stephen Harper signed with Jack Layton and Gilles Duceppe to the Governor General suggesting that, if Paul Martin wasn't able to maintain confidence, there were other options on the table. I can also recall when there was a different formulation when Prime Minister Harper was in, and Jack and Stéphane Dion, with the backing of Gilles Duceppe, said they were prepared to form government.

Our system, I think, responded poorly in a sense, because the Prime Minister was able to pull the fire alarm. There was an imminent confidence vote, and the will of the people in the previous election was about to be expressed, yet it was simply going to the GG and proroguing Parliament, which is quite a bit of power. I find it hard to say that is a good, functioning, democratic system when, as you say, the system is built such as it is to test the House. The House was about to be tested, but the Prime Minister was able to delay that test for months until a campaign was run.

Even the idea of a coalition government was then vilified, even though smart people like you and others would say, "There's nothing unconstitutional about it. It's perfectly legitimate". Is that right? I would assume smart people like you would say things like that.

Mr. Larry Pardy: I might say that now, but I don't think our system is geared towards coalition governments. When those instances happened, they created a certain crisis. I think that the crisis was created because we didn't have the mechanisms in place. We didn't have a Governor General who was either elected or had clear rules. They had historical rules that rarely applied. If we went to a minority system, we could see those situations happening a lot more frequently.

Mr. Nathan Cullen: Yes, of course.

So you and I are running in an election, and you have the support of nobody, but a few more seats than I do. I have the support of other parties. You approach the GG and say, "I got this", even though there were public declarations that, at the first moment you try it, others will bring you down. The GG would then turn to the second-place party, under our current mechanisms and rules, and say, "I don't have confidence in Larry's ability to hold government, and my job as Governor General is to seek stability", which is one of the purviews of the Governor General, "and I'm turning to Cullen to see if he can do it." That exists under our rules currently, does it not?

Mr. Larry Pardy: It seems like it's possible, but we haven't had it. I think the reason we haven't is that we've had a system that works based on the party in power. I think it's that we've had majorities most of the time, and we follow the same practice when we have minorities.

Mr. Nathan Cullen: Out of the last 20, we've had 11 majorities and nine minorities, so most of the time, barely. We've been a little less stable than proportional-voting countries.

Over the last six decades, we've had more elections than many of the proportional countries in the OECD because there's an incentive in proportional systems, even though you have a minority position often, to maintain the government. There's not an incentive to bring it down just because you're up three or four points in the polls, whereas under first past the post, three or four points can turn everything.

Then we have the policy lurch.

I want to turn this to Mr. Blair and Mr. Coffin.

We heard it earlier in testimony today around issues of social justice, procurement for military equipment, and climate change, which would be an underlying one. Over the last 30 or 40 years, there's been the suggestion that the policy lurch is getting worse. Canadians see themselves as a very stable, safe, boring kind of democracy, but on a policy outcome from the voters' perspective, from the investors' perspective, on an issue like climate change, it's very difficult to know where the government is going to be, even in a general sense, 10 years from now because governments spend a lot of time undoing what the last guy did and coming up with a new thing.

Is there any comment on that in terms of moving to a proportional system where there may be a bit more rudder in the water for Canada and expressing the general will of the population in one direction?

Maybe I'll start with you, Andy.

Mr. Andy Blair: I think that policy lurch is a real problem under our current system. It's the same in any winner-take-all system that incentivizes, as ours does, politicization of issues that do not necessarily have to be politicized such as climate change, to take your example. You can slice and dice the electorate on issues and wedge your way into a 39%, 37%, or even a majority government, and you can pull the plug when you want to.

Policy lurch is a real problem. There have been a number of examples in Canadian history on this. First we're in the Kyoto accord, and then we're ripping it up. There are lots of different things like that.

● (1910)

Mr. Nathan Cullen: With particular regard to policies that don't do well over four years, is there some correlation to things like poverty? Rarely can a government enact a set of policies that can help alleviate poverty in a very short time. They take time.

Mr. Andy Blair: Policies that are really short statements that provide a real pop in support are incentivized under winner-take-all systems, whereas longer-term policies that might be harder to implement are disincentivized under our current system. Alleviating poverty would be one potential example, and I think the proof is in the pudding. Look at Professor Lijphart's study of the real results of all those 38 democracies over the last 40 years under consensus style or proportional systems compared to winner-take-all systems.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Nater.

Mr. John Nater: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I've quite enjoyed the discussion from a few of the different questioners on the concept of the confidence convention.

Mr. Pardy, you talked a bit about the chancellor's majority and the constructive vote of non-confidence. I find that interesting and fascinating. It harkens back to some of the work done by predecessors of this committee back in the mid-1980s. The McGrath report, for example, provided a number of interesting suggestions on the confidence convention, as did the Lefebvre committee before that on a number of issues.

Going forward from that, I want to push you a bit on some of these things that you mentioned would have to change to go along with a move to a PR-type system. Before we move to any type of electoral change, should we first look at some of these issues, such as the confidence convention and the formation of governments?

Mr. Larry Pardy: Not before. I think those things go hand in glove with a proportional system. If you're going to go to a system that creates minority parliaments on a regular basis, then you need these sorts of mechanisms in place at that point to achieve stability over the long term.

Mr. John Nater: Thank you for that.

Mr. Coffin, your organization is promoting civic engagement. That's certainly something we would strongly support. I want to look specifically at the younger cohort again. They are generally non-voters or have a lower voting rate than the general population. We did see a small uptick in the last election, which is certainly something to be encouraged.

I want to talk a bit about lowering the voting age. Is that something that you would see as beneficial? To that end, we talked a bit about civic education in past meetings. Is this something you think we need to enhance more at the secondary level and potentially at the primary level as well?

You did mention that you had originally thought about becoming a civics teacher, but instead formed an organization that teaches civics. I want to have your thoughts on the state of civics education in our formal education system.

Mr. Mark Coffin: I'll answer the question around civics education first.

When I started Springtide Collective and began having conversations about how to go about it, one of the people I went back to was a professor I had at Dalhousie, Katherine Fierlbeck. I asked her, because she's a very smart professor, "How do you go about teaching first-year political science? Given the level of political philosophy knowledge you have, how do you bring yourself down to that level?"

She said, "That's not the problem I have. The problem I have is that my job is for these students to leave my classroom with more information and more knowledge and understanding about how government works than when they came in. I haven't figured out how to do that yet without making them more cynical about the process by the time they leave."

That's a challenge we have, too. We're working on all ends of the spectrum. One of the things we really value and privilege in our work is intergenerationalism, and we try to bring conversations together that have both old and young. I think part of the challenge with young people not wanting to engage in politics is that the message they're getting from older people is that it's a problem we have to fix.

I think if we were a Silicon Valley company sitting around a boardroom table saying, "Young people aren't using our phones. Maybe they just need education on how our phones work," we wouldn't be very profitable in the next quarter. Whereas, we should take the approach that there are a few people using our phones and they're sticking around for some reason, so let's talk to them and see how we could make it better.

A lot of those people who are engaged in politics right now are coming to committees like this one and making recommendations for a different system. I think you have to listen to those voices, and I hear that a lot of them are young. I wouldn't put the onus on citizens. If you create a system that people are incented to participate in, they'll learn how to use it.

● (1915)

Mr. John Nater: I want to follow up more generally on the concept of accountability, that direct link between a representative and the voters in a geographic area. Certainly we've had suggestions of a variety of different systems: MMP, STV. However, I want to talk specifically about that link between the MP and their riding, and how important that linkage is from a casework perspective.

Mr. Coffin, I think you decreased the importance of that.

I want to come back maybe to Mr. Pardy to give your comment about how important that direct link is between an MP and their voters, the people who put them in office.

Mr. Larry Pardy: I think a lot of it is how well you get to know your MP and having a local MP that's familiar to people. However, when you get into things like nomination processes and stuff like that, it's how well the MP can reach out to a reasonably sized constituency to attract support.

Then, when you get into an election process, one of the key opportunities for us is when they have the riding debates. I haven't heard anybody explain how that's going to work in a multi-member riding setting. You would perhaps have five members per party in that riding and perhaps five to seven different parties represented, so you'd be looking at 35 people.

Right now, we do get an opportunity to put the five different representatives of the party, or six or whatever, up on the stage, and local people get to ask them questions for each election. It's a very effective opportunity to get a sense of the people. It's not even always just about accountability, but to get a sense of what that individual is going to be like as a representative.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Aldag.

Mr. John Aldag: Okay, I think I'll start with Mr. Coffin.

You had some very interesting statements in your opening comments. You were obviously a bit rushed, and there may have been some details that you didn't get to.

I've been sitting here trying to wrap my mind around one of the things. When our party formed its platform, one of the things that really appealed to me about it was the idea of evidence-based decision-making. In your statements, you opened with this notion that you're a scientist and that there's a lot of good evidence pointing to proportional representation. You didn't say it, but I took it as being a superior kind of system, that it deals with a lot of things that a majoritarian system doesn't.

Yet, as we've been talking to people, to Canadians, over the summer, and to people in the political science field—and this has come up—it seems there are a lot of trade-offs and that there's no perfect system. I'm not necessarily agreeing or disagreeing, but I'd like to give you the chance to try to convince me a bit more that PR is truly superior.

Some of the things you talked about related to party power and policy swings and other elements. On one side, PR can be seen as a benefit in how it addresses those things. Yet with majoritarian systems, I've had constituents of mine say they actually prefer the policy swings. You know exactly where you're going with a Conservative government for 10 years, and some people get tired of them and they get rid of them. Then they put in a Liberal Party for 10 years and you know where the Liberals are going to go.

To have a position that the evidence says the more middle-of-the-road PR system is superior...I'd like you to explain that a bit more.

Mr. Mark Coffin: Sure thing.

I guess the first place I would start is with the most indisputable evidence, which is numbers based: voter participation and women's representation. With both of them, you can essentially draw a line from first past the post to.... We'll start with voter participation. First past the post has had turnout averages in OECD countries over the last 30 years of just under 60%. We don't really have data for AV systems, because Australia has mandatory voting, but in PR systems it's 68% for list PR, 76% for MMP, and 70.4% for single transferable vote. These are stats from OECD countries over the last 30 years, with mandatory voting countries removed, so there are no incentives and penalties behind it.

For women's representation, simply stated, PR systems have more representation of women. I think the best case to look at is Australia, where they use two different systems, one for the senate and one for the House of Representatives. The senate uses STV, and the House of Representatives uses alternative vote to elect their representatives. Since that's been the case, there's been consistently about a 10% difference, from 25% in the House, to 35% or so in the the senate in recent years, for the number of seats held by women. That's huge.

● (1920)

Mr. John Aldag: It's too bad that my colleague Ms. Sahota's time looking at the women's piece has passed, because we've also heard that in proportional representation systems you often get a 2% to 3% increase. The participation rates don't go up that much. Are there other ways of dealing with participation?

Mr. Mark Coffin: Where are those statistics coming from?

Mr. John Aldag: I can get them to you, and you can get yours to me. It's just that there didn't seem to be—

The Chair: They were from André Blais, a political scientist at the Université de Montréal.

Mr. John Aldag: I'm just saying that there is a whole bunch of evidence, but it's more of a mixed bag than I was hearing from you. If it's voter participation, that's an issue things like mandatory voting could be another way of dealing with.

Mr. Mark Coffin: That would definitely raise voter participation.

Mr. John Aldag: Okay. It was intriguing and, as I said, I appreciate what you've been able to give us in a short period of time, but I have to challenge the idea that PR is going to solve all of the political ills that we have, just because I think there are a lot of other things we can do.

Mr. Mark Coffin: I'm not saying it will solve all of them. I'm just saying if you were to pick one thing, the evidence suggests that this could be more transformative than would something like mandatory voting, or something like lowering the voting age. Those may be good ideas on their own, and I haven't done much research into them, but I've looked at some of the statistics you may be referring to and my sense is that the ones that don't have as clear an effect generally involve fewer countries and smaller time frames or countries with more differences in social context. If you look at Turkey, there are very few women representatives in parliament, but there's a social context there that's not seen in Canada or in western

European countries, where the situation is probably socially more similar.

Mr. John Aldag: Thank you.

The Chair: Monsieur Rayes.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Alain Rayes: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

First of all, I would like to say to Mr. Coffin that I share my colleague's opinion. Political science professors from several universities came to speak to us. The opinions they gave us were diametrically opposed as to the effects of the proportional voting system. We are having trouble sorting it all out, insofar as the representation of women is concerned, and the percentage of the votes.

Among the recommended models, a professor from Concordia whose name escapes me opted for the preferential vote, another for the proportional system, and a third for the status quo.

It isn't easy for us to sort all this out.

I was struck by your comment on the fact that politicians and political parties did not take young people's perspectives into account. Yesterday, one witness told us that if we adopted compulsory voting, we could reduce inequalities in our society. If everyone voted, politicians would have no other choice than to take into account the opinion of low-income people, of the the poorest citizens. For that group, voting is often a less natural gesture.

I would like to hear your opinion, all three of you. If we brought in compulsory voting, would the vast majority of citizens vote, would it have a positive effect? Politicians would then have to take into account the opinions of the entire population, and we would not have to change the voting system. I would like to hear your opinions on having an obligatory vote.

● (1925)

[*English*]

Mr. Mark Coffin: Maybe just as a point of clarification, in the translation that came through, you said that I said political parties don't take into account people's interests. I don't know if that's completely accurate.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Alain Rayes: No, no. I thought you said that if we took young people's opinions into account more, political parties might make other types of proposals. Unless I am mistaken, we are not taking young people's opinions into account enough.

If voting were mandatory, a larger number of young people would vote, necessarily, and so political parties would not have a choice and would have to take their opinions into account, correct?

[*English*]

Mr. Mark Coffin: Right. On the surface, that's one of the benefits to a mandatory voting law. A downside, which you can see in the research, is that when you have mandatory voting laws you get fewer women elected. I have a statistic that I'll find in my papers here. Generally in states where there are mandatory voting laws, there is a decline in women's representation from when there wasn't mandatory voting.

The other thing I would say is that it doesn't necessarily create a situation where there will be consideration of those issues. Certainly there is a new voting base out there, but in single-member electoral districts, as we have in most winner-take-all systems and in our system, there is an incentive for parties to find the wedge issues that will get them elected in the ridings in which they need to get elected in order to hold just enough power to form a government. That won't go away with a mandatory voting law, but they'll start to consider the incentives.

It's not necessarily a foregone conclusion, but the incentive is to maybe work slightly harder to get power in those ridings where you need it. There's no reason to believe that if one part of the country is disadvantaged.... Atlantic Canada is an example. I wouldn't say we are necessarily disadvantaged, but if we were to become so, the fact that all of us can vote won't have much of an impact if the population is growing in other places and they continue to hold power.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Alain Rayes: Mr. Blair and Mr. Pardy, I would like to hear your opinion on compulsory voting.

[*English*]

Mr. Andy Blair: Fair Vote doesn't actually have a position on mandatory voting. I would have to say, though, that it's a double-edged sword. Not to be elitist about it, but a number of people choose not to pay attention, not to vote. That's their choice. Forcing them to vote would tend to engender some resentment. I'm not sure how you would force them to vote. Maybe fine them, as they do in Australia, if they don't cast a ballot.

I'd be more in favour of mandatory participation, where you have to show up rather than necessarily having to mark a ballot.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Alain Rayes: That is what I meant, by the way. People have to turn up, and afterwards they can vote as they see fit. They can choose to return a blank ballot if they wish.

[*English*]

Mr. Andy Blair: Instead of mandatory voting, a better strategy would be to set up a system that incentivizes political participation on a voluntary basis, where they view politics better and view their vote as actually counting toward making a difference, etc.

● (1930)

The Chair: Mr. Pardy, if you can be brief, go ahead.

Mr. Larry Pardy: I don't really have much of a position on it anyway. I would just say that it seems to run counter to the notion of democracy and free choice of what you want to do and whether you want to vote or not.

The Chair: Thank you.

Ms. Romanado.

Mrs. Sherry Romanado: Thank you very much.

I'd like to thank our three panellists for being here this evening and the members of the audience for coming out to listen. I know that I'm the person standing in the way of the public open-mike session, so I'll try to be brief.

On the question of sitting on our hands, I was the MP who was talking about our non-clapping initiative.

My question is for you, Mr. Coffin. You talked a little bit about women's representation. Right now, 26% of our members of Parliament are women. Often folks come here and explain to us, and I love having males explain to us, why women run for politics. That being said, there are two issues. The first is the decision to run for the nomination or for office, and the second is getting elected, and we have to separate the two.

Ms. May will tell you the same thing I will tell you, which is that it is incredibly difficult to convince women to run for office for many reasons, and I guarantee you that none of them have anything to do with the first-past-the-post electoral system. It has to do with the fact that if you decide to have children as a member of Parliament, you do not have paid maternity leave, so you're on an unpaid leave of absence. There is no day care for anyone under 18 months of age. If you happen to live in British Columbia, the fact that you have to travel a long distance to go to work is not really an incentive. You're spending a good 10 to 12 hours on a plane there and back. The fact that our Parliament sits more than any other Parliament in the Westminster system, except for the U.K., could also be a disincentive.

There are other reasons women decide not to pursue public office. A lot of it is the cynicism, the adversarial tone. It's not the electoral system per se. Once we decide to run, there might be a reason behind that, but I am living proof that you can run in a non-winnable riding. I'm the proof that we women can succeed, so when people tell me that proportional representation is the Noah's Ark, if you like, plumbing for all the ills of our electoral system, it is a fallacy in my view.

I'm not against proportional representation. I don't have an opinion right now. I'm listening to Canadians, but I think we need to put the good, the bad, and the ugly out on the table because there is no perfect system. It is an ecosystem, and as my colleague said, we actually have a lot of things we can be doing that can address some of the boo-boos we have, i.e., mandatory voting; i.e., quotas for increasing women on the ballot; i.e., zippered ballots. There are many things. It's not one thing that's going to fix the system.

I just had to get that off my chest.

Mr. Pardy, you talked a little bit about your non-preference for PR systems. In your opinion, what system, if not a PR system, do you think Canada should look at, whether it be first past the post, AV, or AV-plus? Could you give us your opinion?

Mr. Larry Pardy: I'm satisfied that first past the post gives us effective governance in this country, based on the outcomes that have been achieved for Canada and where we rank in world rankings on just about every measure. First past the post is fine.

Some people seem to prefer that MPs should get at least 50% of their riding behind them and want alternative voting, a ranked ballot, or whatever. That is fine too, if they want to go that way, but then you get into the question of whether it's a more complex system.

Mrs. Sherry Romanado: To address the issue of distortion in electoral results, would you think it would be an idea to perhaps add a small amount of proportional? We could keep ridings perhaps the way they are right now but add some proportional regional seats to fix the distortion we currently have. What are your thoughts on that?

Right now, Canadians are asking us to make it a little more reflective of what the actual intent is at the polls. Keeping it as is obviously wouldn't address that issue. One of the guiding principles is to make sure that it is reflective of what Canadians are expecting at the polls.

Could you give me your opinion on that?

Mr. Larry Pardy: I think that's more a misconception than anything. If you expect proportional outcomes when you have a riding-based system with more than one party, it's just not going to happen. If there's an education requirement, so be it. I think the system works as intended, and I think it's a fair system.

I point, too, to a case taken to court in Quebec on the whole system. I think it was the Daoust case. It was found that the system respected both democracy and equality rights, so there isn't a problem that way. The court's view was that this system adequately reflects our democratic rights.

● (1935)

The Chair: Thank you. That was a very interesting panel. You gave us some fresh angles on the issue.

Mr. Coffin, when you said you were a marine biologist, I thought immediately back to a gentleman I used to deal with about 20 years ago when I was working in an MP's office in Ottawa. If my memory serves, he was very keen on making sure that the wreck of the *Titanic* was protected from treasure hunters. I see his name here on the speakers list: Dr. Alan Ruffman.

A voice: [*Inaudible—Editor*]

The Chair: It's not the same one. Okay. There's an Alan Ruffman who was a marine biologist here in Halifax, and you look like Dr. Alan Ruffman on top of it.

We'll have two people at the microphones, please, for two minutes.

Thank you to the witnesses for coming. We really appreciate it.

Mr. Aubrey Fricker (As an Individual): I must begin by sincerely thanking you for holding these public consultations. I think what you're doing is wonderful, but I must immediately follow that with an apology. I'm afraid my hearing is now so shot that I can't really make out what's being said over the amplification system.

What I've prepared takes just under four minutes to deliver. Shall we leave it at that? I left four copies with the registration desk, and they can duplicate it for you.

The Chair: Here's what I would suggest. Is it under 3,000 words, do you think?

Mr. Aubrey Fricker: Oh yes, absolutely.

The Chair: That then qualifies as a brief to the committee, and if you give it to us—I think you may have already—we can have a look at it, have it translated perhaps, and put on the website.

If you could, just take two minutes to give us the main points.

Mr. Aubrey Fricker: Two minutes, just for the meat of it...?

The Chair: That's right, yes.

Mr. Aubrey Fricker: Okay. Here are the key ones.

Our government was evolved to provide us with representation in two forms. The first is a body to express our societal values, and the second is a body to express our interests. Historically, humanity was organized geographically, and a country was a composite of domains, so both our values and our interests needed geographic representation.

Representing societal values was achieved by elections within a constituency. Our values need selected representatives and a meeting place for them to have discussions. All citizens must join in the selecting of that person. There should be a sanction attached for not participating. There should be an ongoing healthy dialogue and rapport between citizens and their representative. It means that citizens must focus on the qualities of the person whom they will choose and not on a party or leader.

It's clear to me that the system that will most encourage this is not first past the post nor proportional representation, but is preferential voting. If we have to rank each of the candidates, then we're going to spend more time thinking about them. I can advance no better structure for achieving that than geographic constituencies.

In summary, please give us preferential voting by geographic constituency for the House, and nomination by the interest organizations with the most subscribers across Canada for the Senate.

Thank you.

● (1940)

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Go ahead, Mr. Sokolov, for two minutes.

Mr. Daniel Sokolov (As an Individual): Good evening. Welcome to Nova Scotia. Thanks for coming here.

My name is Daniel Sokolov, and I've been an election officer many times, for the last three elections as a deputy returning officer. I wanted to offer you something from the front lines. I was not high ranking; I was actually dealing with all the voters.

I think that proportional representation is the way to go. But whatever way you go, keep it simple.

I heard the gentleman before talking about other voting systems in which you rank candidates. My experience from the front line is that for certain segments of the electorate, doing that would be too complicated. For people who are educated or for people who have studied election systems for a while, the meaning of simple may be very different. I don't mean any disrespect to anyone, but it is amazing what you encounter at the polls; and those are the people who actually want to come, who take the effort to put on clothes and go out and make a public statement, "Here I am. I want to vote".

A voice: They put on clothes?

Voices: Oh, oh!

Mr. Daniel Sokolov: Well, they do here in Nova Scotia.

I think that the ranking has its academic advantages definitely, but I think it's just too complicated for certain people. It would overwhelm and frustrate some of them, so please keep it simple.

The second thing I want to touch on has to do with my professional side. I've been in IT, information technology, for about 15 years. There are many great applications for IT and the Internet, but voting is not one of them, so I urge you to stay away from electronic voting. There are companies that invite you to nice dinners and that tout their systems. We have an election here in Halifax that uses that. Personally, I think it's a disaster. It leads to lower voter turnout. You have probably also heard about the many problems with its security, identification of voters, and outside influence.

I also want to touch on two very different things that are not actually related to technology, and those are things that you can't solve and that e-voting undermines. One is trust in the voting system, and the other thing is the ceremonial aspect of voting. All important things in our lives involve a ceremony: when we get baptized or not, when we finish school, when we get elected, when we get a degree, when we get married. All these things are ceremonies. Going out to vote is a ceremony that underscores the importance of voting. If you do it on your phone while you're on the loo, like liking someone on Facebook, I don't think that's the way our political system should go.

Thank you very much.

The Chair: Thank you.

Go ahead, please, Mr. MacGillivray.

Mr. Francis MacGillivray (As an Individual): Thank you for listening.

It was appropriate that I walked by the Nova Scotia Legislature on the way here today, just a block away, because that's the place where representative government started in Canada. It's also the first place for responsible government outside of Britain. Nova Scotia is a place where representative government started, and I'd like to make the argument that proportional representation would effectively erode or destroy representational government.

Representational government is about representing people, not parties. The House of Commons is the house of commoners; it's not a house of parties. It may amount to that somewhat in practice, but that's not something we want to push forward any more.

Governments govern and MPs represent constituents, but the parties' raison d'être is power. We know a government is doing a good job when it has good governance. An MP is doing his or her job when he or she provides good representation. But a party is doing a good job when it's working towards power.

This is basically a complaint about the party system and how giving seats that are just going to represent parties is a bad thing. MPs' votes are whipped. Extreme retaliation faces an MP who votes against his or her party. We know MP Bill Casey is a local hero because he voted against a party in power, against a money bill. I'd argue he's a hero, not because he voted against an unpopular party or was supporting Nova Scotia but I think he's a local hero because he represented himself and not the party. He went against the party.

Free votes are a rare thing. That's because of the party system. Imagine if every vote were a free vote. The only MP who can really have a free vote is an independent MP.

I could go on. Parties move to the political centre as they get closer to power, because that's the objective of the party system. Look at the surreal situation in the United States, where Republicans who don't necessarily like their leader are going to hold their nose and vote anyway because they support their party. It's all about the party.

The antagonistic nature of the House, I would also argue, is based on the party system.

Everybody has their pet arguments as to what's wrong with politics. My argument is that it's the party system. I note that a lot of you people are members of parties. Like-minded people will get together and talk about things that are important to them and move things forward, so we'll always have the party system.

● (1945)

The Chair: Thank you. That's a fresh perspective on the issue. We haven't heard too much on that.

Mr. Francis MacGillivray: In summary, I think that to give the parties a member of Parliament who would vote for them and not their constituents would be the wrong move.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thanks very much.

Mr. Chris Maxwell, go ahead.

Mr. Chris Maxwell (As an Individual): To start, I think first past the post leads to distortions and a significant disconnect between voter intention and results. It could also lead to strategic voting, which creates a second level of distortion between stated preference and actual preference.

I believe most people are voting for ideas rather than people, even though we have the formal voting for the person. However, I'm also not willing to give up on the possibility of calling my MP. I would like a system that does have some sort of MP who is mine, even if there's one or more of them. In terms of simplicity, I do still like the idea of a ranked ballot. It's possible that maybe, just with an implementation that an X means one and nobody else, that's an adequate addressing of the actual boots-on-the-ground issue. It is complicated.

I also want to talk about mandatory voting, Internet voting, and young people who are of voting age. With mandatory voting, I think it just papers over the problem. If we're concerned about people not coming out to vote, I think it's that they're more disengaged as opposed to lacking an incentive to show up to the polls. I'd prefer if we didn't have people walking into a voting booth, blindfolded, playing "pin the tail on the ballot".

As an IT person, I would like to repeat the concerns about Internet voting. We have seen the experience with voting machines below the border. They're programmed to trick the voter into choosing against their actual preference. The straight-up reporting of inaccurate results....

How much time do I have?

The Chair: You have another few seconds. You just made your point about Internet voting.

Mr. Chris Maxwell: Yes. In terms of ID requirements, we've already brought in better ID requirements. Now I can just pick up about 25 voting cards from the lobby of my apartment building and....

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Alan Ruffman, go ahead, please.

Mr. Alan Ruffman (As an Individual): Francis, I have to be impressed by your memory. You were bang on.

Voices: Oh, oh!

Mr. Alan Ruffman: I do remember Clifford's intense interest, and yours. The American scavengers, however, got the better of us. Canada chose not to defend the wreck, even though it ended up inside our juridical limit under Law of the Sea.

I'll speak very briefly about geography. Geography does matter, and in Canada, size matters. In effect, the issue I want to lay before you is that certain MPs have a whole lot more environment to be concerned with. If we consider that the environment of Canada is important, and will become increasingly important, whether it's preservation of species, preservation of enough fresh water for everyone, or ocean species, we have to think about environment.

Now, how the hell do you represent environment or the amount of coastline or fresh water in some sort of voting system? None of the polar bears that are getting wiped out on the west coast of Hudson's Bay, and none of the mainland moose that are just a little bit north of us, have a vote or even know that it's going on, but their livelihood and their survival as species depend upon a large number of MPs acting in concert to preserve their environment.

I'll leave that with you. I don't have a solution for it, but I will point out that just north of here, they're arguing about striped bass. The striped bass are in the Shubenacadie River, which is the border between Colchester and East Hants. Why the hell is the river a border? It's because people couldn't cross borders at one time, so we made the rivers the borders for constituencies. Now we have bridges and a lot of other ways of going over those boundaries.

Those are just a few thoughts.

Thanks very much for coming.

●(1950)

The Chair: Thank you very much, Dr. Ruffman.

Go ahead, Ms. Dawson-Murphy.

Ms. Hannah Dawson-Murphy (As an Individual): Hi, everyone. Thank you for coming to Halifax and taking the time to listen to Canadians. However, I and many others feel that this is not enough to justify changing the way we have been voting since Confederation.

We've heard that there have been over 150 town halls in Canada by members of Parliament. I attended two, one in my riding of West Nova, and also the one in Kings—Hants where I attend Acadia University. Both of these town halls had no more than 30 people at them, and one of them only had 10. Other attendees, along with myself, who don't see eye to eye with our members of Parliament in those ridings, felt they were not heard or really respected while giving our opinions.

I feel that a referendum would give every single person in this country a say in the matter. It's extremely important, in my point of view, that we hold a referendum and give every single person a say in the system that this committee chooses.

Again, I want to thank you all for coming to Atlantic Canada and hearing my concerns, along with everybody else's concerns. I really hope you all work in a non-partisan way to support having a referendum.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

But first we'll have Mr. Zurawski.

Mr. Richard Zurawski (As an Individual): Thank you very much for taking the time to have me here, and thank you very much for taking the time to be here.

I'm extremely interested in what goes on in the environment and what happens to our planet. If anything, in the last 10 years, the preceding government has shown me that first past the post gives us a non-secular government with dogmatic approaches, which actually causes such great regression that our environment is threatened. Our scientists were muzzled, vested interests had a toehold in our way of government, and neo-liberal perspectives and inadvertent totalitarianism gained hold in Canada. I don't see that as being a good thing.

What I would like to see is a form of proportional representation, because it does have the potential to prevent this type of government from gaining hold again, and it does prevent secularity from working its way into the government. What I'm intensely interested in is resolving some of the great problems facing us today related to the environment, climate change, species depletion, and the great extinctions that are happening around us.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. McMillan, the mike is yours for two minutes.

●(1955)

Mr. Matthew McMillan (As an Individual): I'm sorry, I'm not the most polished public speaker, but I think I have some valid points to make.

First of all, I'd like to say that I do support proportional representation. However, besides that, I'm worried that we might be threatening the advances made with proportional representation if we also go ahead and allow electronic voting or Internet voting, or even electronic vote counting.

I was very disappointed to hear Marc Mayrand suggest that we should have electronic vote counting in the future. Recently, the supreme court of Germany decided that electronic vote counting was against their constitution because of the threats to the transparent election process. I think it's very important to have transparency in our electoral processes. I really hope that you recommend to the government not to go ahead with any form of electronic voting.

That's probably two minutes, is it?

The Chair: No, you still have about 45 seconds.

It's great information. This is very good testimony.

If you have anything else to add, go ahead, but if not, that's fine too.

Mr. Matthew McMillan: I just hope you recommend to keep the hand count.

It's the most transparent process as far as enumerating. The electronic voting technology is susceptible to hacking, from what I've read from computer scientists and political scientists and the like online.

The Chair: That's very interesting. Thank you so much.

Go ahead, Mr. Berard.

Mr. Robert Berard (As an Individual): I had a look at the website today. It struck me, as I read the website, that rather than finding a solution for a problem we don't have, it suggested between 12 and 24 solutions for a problem I don't think we have with first past the post.

If we do, and if there is importance in having every MP elected with a majority of votes, I suggest you consider the runoff system that the French have.

The main point I want to make, however, has to do with the desire for inclusion, transparency, and meaningful engagement. I don't believe that anything in these reform proposals would effect those ends, but it would rather render the process less inclusive, less transparent, and potentially more alienating to voters. I would urge you to consider committing to a referendum on the matter. The process that has been designed here will exclude those who are unable to meet with this panel, whose right to vote on the question is their best guarantee of inclusion.

I might say, finally, that one of the reasons I would ask the government to reconsider its opposition to a clear referendum on a clear question of electoral reform is that Canadians, especially those who are members of designated groups, are being presented, in the current process, with over a dozen electoral systems in effect around the world, with substantial variations of each.

At the end of the day, the government will have to propose one, and this carbon-heavy process in which we are engaging here may or may not play much of a role in what that proposed solution will be. Whatever it turns out to be, the government should be prepared to let Canadians choose directly whether they prefer that reform or prefer to keep the system they have and know. I would suggest that a government that is frightened to find out the answer does not advance but mocks the principles that are laid out here.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Makenzie, go ahead.

Mr. Daniel Makenzie (As an Individual): Thank you, everyone. Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I know that a referendum has been up in the air, and I know that changing the electoral system behind Canadians' back has also been up in the air. Why do we need to change first past the post? It's a system that works. It is proven to work, and it is best suited for the Westminster system. First past the post has been around for over 150 years, and it has been able to keep Canada stable through some of the greatest events in world history, including World War I, World War II, and the Great Depression. It has brought stability and kept parliamentarians to account. People wanted change in 2015, and they got it—and it was with first past the post.

Why change it? If we need a change, why not have a referendum and let Canadians choose how they elect their elected officials?

Thank you.

●(2000)

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Mr. Deschênes, go ahead, please.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Patrice Deschênes (As an Individual): Good evening.

My name is Patrice Deschênes. I live in Halifax.

I arrived about 30 minutes ago and I heard a lot of horror stories. The fish are dying, polar bears are disappearing, nature is expiring, and all of it is due to the electoral system. A large part of the population is ignored, their voices are not heard, and all of that is because of our electoral system.

It is as if these people live in a parallel universe where they create imaginary problems. The reality I see here in Canada is a country that has been a democratic beacon in the world for 150 years. I see a country where, despite the fact that political parties don't agree, there is continuity in policies, except for the current government, whose objective is to completely erase the policies of the previous government. Nevertheless, the system works. This party was elected and has the right to act.

Creating imaginary problems and trying to solve them with medication that doesn't exist is something Molière spoke about in his play *The Imaginary Invalid*. That is what we are doing here in Canada. This exercise is a big charade, a long play by Molière. I find this disappointing.

I invite you to reconsider this effort, and I invite Canadians to reconsider their imaginary illness. Before we move to another system, please, hold a referendum, because Canadians know that we live in a country that is one of the world's leaders, a country that is economically stable and politically sound, a country where everyone benefits from our democratic strength.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you.

[*English*]

Mr. John Nater: I have a point of order, Mr. Chair.

I'd just like to point out that Molière's *The Hypochondriac* is currently playing at the Stratford Festival in my riding, Perth—Wellington, for anyone who wishes to visit me.

The Chair: I accept that point of order.

Ms. Hauer.

Ms. Suzanne Hauer (As an Individual): Hello. Thank you so much.

My heart is pounding. I am not a public speaker, and I had no intention of speaking, but having been here since 1:15 this afternoon, I did not hear the point of view that I felt I wanted to express. I do have an electronic version that I will be sending to you tomorrow, I promise. But here's the point of view I would like to express—and please, my notes are so scribbled that I can hardly read them—about how addicted we are as Canadians to being able to have a relationship with our MP.

I can sympathize with this position, regarding the person-to-person point of view. I personally do not want a social worker, i.e., a constituency worker MP. I want an MP who will work together with other MPs to create policy to help Canada navigate into the future, policy that makes the social work role of an elected MP obsolete.

Many countries I admire have PR systems without the local MP component. In our riding, what counts as accountability is how many favours an MP has granted, how many ribbons have been cut, or how many funerals have been attended. Please do not think that I devalue an elected representative who is engaged with his or her community, but if I had to choose between having an MP who creates comprehensive policy for Canada's future and having one who gets re-elected based on how many public events he or she has been seen at between elections, I think you know what I would choose.

While I am, at this time, favouring MMP, which gives constituencies their own MP, I just wanted you to know that at least one Canadian has another viewpoint of an MP's role. I think PR can support my view of an MP.

Thank you, and I am against a referendum.

● (2005)

The Chair: Thank you so much.

Both tonight's and this afternoon's open mike have been very thoughtful sessions with a lot of unique viewpoints and insights. People, you show us how it's done. Halifax, you really show what an open-mike session is all about and how it should work. Congratulations on your fabulous democratic spirit! Thank you for coming out.

To the members of the committee, we're meeting at 5:45 a.m. in the lobby for the plane.

Thank you so much.