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Mr. Francis Scarpaleggia

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● (1335)

[*English*]

The Chair (Mr. Francis Scarpaleggia (Lac-Saint-Louis, Lib.)): The meeting is officially opened. Welcome to the 37th meeting of the Special Committee on Electoral Reform. It's hard to believe that we've met that many times, but we've been quite busy, since I think it was June or July.

For the benefit of the witnesses, we met quite a bit during the summer in Ottawa, including quite intensively in August.

We've been on the road for two and a half weeks now. It's great to be in St. John's, Newfoundland. It seems that wherever we go, the weather is nice, so I think we're bringing some good weather. That may augur well for our report.

We have three witnesses with us today for this first panel. We have Amanda Bittner, associate professor at Memorial University. We have Christopher Dunn and Robert Ring.

I'll give you a brief overview of how we proceed. Each witness will have five minutes to present. Then we have one round of questions and answers when each member of the committee is allotted five minutes to engage with the witnesses. That five minutes includes questions and answers. If you find you weren't able to answer a question properly because of the time limits, it doesn't mean you can't finish your thought the next time you have the floor. In fact, sometimes a member, when it comes around to them, will say, “You weren't able to finish your point answering so and so. Please take some time to finish your thought.” We're pretty flexible in the interest of gathering the most insight that we can.

Without further ado, we'll start with Professor Bittner, for five minutes, please.

Ms. Amanda Bittner (Associate Professor, Memorial University, As an Individual): Thank you to the committee for inviting me to speak today.

I've been studying elections and voting for a number of years now. While my primary focus is voting behaviour, both in Canada and other contexts, I do spend a great deal of time thinking about the rules of the game that affect how parties, candidates, and voters interact, how they understand their roles, and how they make decisions. To be frank, rules matter. They affect everything, but not always in ways that we might expect.

I'm not here to advocate for a specific system, but I do have two main points that I'd like to make. I'd also be happy to answer any questions the committee has, either on these points or other issues.

[*Translation*]

I'm not a francophone, but I hope my French will be adequate enough to answer your questions in French. We shall see.

[*English*]

I know that this committee has been touring the country and has heard testimony from a number of different witnesses, academic and otherwise, and I imagine at this point you have heard it all. Academics don't agree on what's the best system, interest groups don't agree on what's the best system.

As a result, there appear to be many options with many outcomes, and I think this is actually pretty accurate. There are multiple options and all of those systems do have trade-offs, so even small tweaks can have an important impact and major changes can lead to unanticipated consequences.

My first main point is that before the country embarks on change, I think it's important to talk about the goals. We really cannot talk about solutions until we clearly identify the problems. What is the government hoping to achieve with electoral reform? What is this committee hoping to achieve? What motivates all this work and all of these hearings?

What do we think is actually wrong with the SMP system? Until we clearly establish the answer to that question, it's impossible for us to find a good solution. All systems have trade-offs, as I mentioned, and at the root of each is a normative idea about how politics should be.

When we talk about SMP as political science instructors, usually quite quickly, which is very confusing, we often point to five key shortcomings.

It tends to distort votes and creates false majorities, so we get a majority in the legislature where a majority did not exist in the population. It can produce wrong winners. Minority interests and smaller parties often get shut out of the legislature. It can lead to wasted votes. Close observers of Canadian politics, in particular, have pointed to a key shortcoming of our system, which is that it exacerbates and magnifies regional distortions in parties' representation, thus perhaps contributing to regional strife.

These five points are not new to you and I imagine you've heard these points at least 50 times by now.

When we talk about the benefits of SMP, we often refer to the following three features. First, it's familiar, we know it and we understand it, sort of. Second, the system includes an identifiable local representative. You are those reps, you know how important that is to Canadians. Third it tends to produce stable majority governments. Again, this is not news.

Then why am I bringing this simple introduction to political science, this listed system of pros and cons, to the committee like this?

It's not clear to me that the government has clearly laid out what it perceives to be the problem with SMP in advance of embarking on this process. Furthermore, which system we prefer depends on our priorities and values. If we as individuals value co-operation, negotiation, and having more voices heard in the legislature, we might prefer a more proportional system. However, if the local candidate is a bigger priority, or if we prefer decisive governments with lots of power to “get things done” then we might prefer a plurality system like the one we have. The important thing here is that values undergird everything and it's impossible to dissociate those two things.

I'm agnostic about system choice. As I stated, all systems have trade-offs and there's no perfect system. There are pros and cons to our system, and there are pros and cons to systems we might adopt.

The thing that I'm not agnostic about is the desirability of making a change before we identify clearly what the problem is with the status quo. This is not to say that I don't think we have problems. My issue is that I don't believe that we have sufficiently informed Canadians about what we think the problem is and what specifically we want to fix, because I think that different problems have different solutions and that those things will have to be traded off. There is no perfect system.

This brings me to my second key point. In suggesting emphatically that we need to establish the problem before we can find the solution, it occurs to me that the committee is likely to press me on what I perceive the problem to be. I might as well throw this in, just to give you something. Canada is a country that's built on diversity—diverse geography, diverse history, diverse people with diverse backgrounds, diverse sets of interests, priorities, values, and in particular, diverse sets of ideas of how society ought to look, what we ought to do, what our goals ought to be.

Our system of national politics, as it exists right now, does fail us because it does not represent Canadians as it could or as it should. While our Prime Minister declares that it's 2016, the under-representation of traditionally marginalized groups continues. Women constitute only about 25% of the Legislature, less than 15% of the Legislature is composed of visible minority MPs, and only 10 of the 338 sitting MPs are indigenous.

This is important for two reasons.

First, it gives Canadians a skewed idea of what it means to be a politician. Millions of people, people like me, look at Parliament and don't see it as a place where they belong. Our children growing up today are learning about what it means to be a citizen of Canada, but they look at Parliament and don't see themselves there. This is a major problem.

Second, the lack of diversity in the Legislature stymies progress. Diversity of experience provides a diversity of voices, a diversity of perspectives, and has the potential to lead to new and innovative solutions to contemporary policy problems. Thus, our system fails us symbolically, but it also fails us on a practical level.

This is the problem with our politics as I see it, and I strongly believe that this is worth fixing.

This is just one informed opinion. The important thing here is that before we get serious about making changes, the committee needs to identify what problem it wants to solve. This is my opinion. I think that's one problem and there might be a number of solutions to that problem. I urge you as a committee to take this suggestion seriously as you move forward in this process.

Without clearly outlining the problem, it's really difficult to find a solution. Making a change just for change's sake is not a good idea.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Professor Dunn, go ahead, sir.

Mr. Christopher Dunn (As an Individual): Thank you.

First of all, I'd like to stress that my research background is not in electoral systems or the subject matter of the committee, but is in fact of a more generalist method. What I bring to the committee hopefully is a more general perspective. In terms of this committee, that is the international perspective.

What I'm going to do is not so much make a recommendation but establish questions for discussion. My paper therefore is suggestive in nature. I see a basic conundrum at work with regard to electoral systems. That is that national leadership in English-speaking North Atlantic countries tends to centralize power, especially where external affairs are concerned. On the other hand, electoral reform tends to decentralize it. This point is generally ignored.

The second point is that the SMP system is remarkably durable in these three north Atlantic countries. That must be because there is a political calculus at work with the leadership that points to a utility for their purposes. The utility that I suggest they have is that power shared is power diminished. The point they bring therefore is not to be ignored.

Third, these facts have implications for electoral systems. In the paper I have presented and prepared, I'm going to tease out some of the rationale that I think is being used by these leaders. I use a concept called the North Atlantic triangle. The North Atlantic triangle is a concept used by historians in the past. It basically refers to relationships among America, Britain, and Canada. I suggest that it be applied to electoral reform simply because these three countries are the holdouts with regard to SMP. They are holdouts against electoral reform. They are holdouts, I suggest, because of the nature of the advantages it offers. Especially in external affairs, these are significant.

I suggest that there is a common culture at work with regard to these three countries. The leadership in them regards electoral reform as a contextual element.

In other words, changes in one element affect other elements of the system. This implies a certain caution with regard to its reform. Leadership regards these matters as being in alignment. Therefore, they are cautious about making reforms that affect one part of the system because it might affect the whole system.

I think it's especially important to realize that the considerations for those who have involved themselves in electoral reform are especially important in matters of international diplomacy, international conflict and peacekeeping, trade and environmental matters.

I have much more to say. Perhaps that can be teased out in discussion with the members.

The Chair: That would be a good idea because there will be many questions and that would be a good way of drawing out some of your additional material, if that's okay.

We're a bit over time.

You have one more point?

Mr. Christopher Dunn: I have one more point. The issue is particularly important for a country like Canada that has a need for agile relationships with members, other members of the triangle, and other members of the international community. I'm making a number of recommendations or suggestions or directions.

The Chair: Professor, your recommendations are in the brief?

That's perfect.

Our staff has the brief, and some of the recommendations will come out in discussion and those that do not will still make it to the analysts' desks.

Thank you.

We'll go now to Mr. Ring.

Mr. Robert Ring (As an Individual): Thank you.

The topic I'm here to discuss today is an electoral system that I designed. It was the subject of my master's thesis that was completed in 2014, and Dr. Bittner was my supervisor. The system is called proportional first past the post.

The Chair: You only did it for the Atlantic region. At the end of the day, which party received how many seats? What was the breakdown of seats according to your simulation? I'd like to let some members probe your system through Q and A. How many seats did each party get in the end, for the Atlantic?

Mr. Robert Ring: In this situation here there would have been 34 Atlantic seats.

The Chair: That's up from 32 today. Is that correct?

Mr. Robert Ring: Yes. There needs to be an even number per riding, and Labrador was kept as one riding. Nova Scotia also had an odd number of ridings, so they would get 12 instead of 11.

The Chair: Okay. But out of 34, which party got how many seats?

Mr. Robert Ring: I'll just look at the totals here. I have the list here of each party and who was elected in each riding. I haven't actually totalled the parties for all of Atlantic Canada.

The Chair: You don't have a line there that says how many seats the Conservatives got, how many seats the...? If you need to tally that up, that's fine.

Mr. Robert Ring: Okay. I could tally that up.

The Chair: Perhaps you could tally that up while we start the round of questions. That would be an interesting result to know.

We'll start our round of questions with Ms. Sahota for five minutes, please.

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

It's fantastic to be here in St. John's. It's my first time here and it's beautiful. It's probably one of the most beautiful places I've been in Canada. You're quite lucky to have these views every day.

My first question goes to you, Professor Bittner. It's nice to have you on the panel. I know you've done work on women in politics. It's nice to have women on this panel. It's not often we've been able to get a whole bunch of witnesses who are women.

I agree with you 100% that one of the main problems our system faces is diversity. When we hear from people at the open mike, whether they're talking about diversity of political view or ideology, about women or aboriginals or other minorities, or about other diverse factors that we need represented in our Parliament, that is a main issue that we're seeing come up time after time.

You were basically saying let's figure out what the problem is and then come up with a solution. If that's the main problem, what would be your solution? Do you think Mr. Ring's idea, the set-up of the system he's created, would solve that problem?

Ms. Amanda Bittner: That's a great question. This is one of those answers that may or may not satisfy the committee at the end of the day. For every problem, there are multiple solutions. You could go wholeheartedly into massive changes that might address some of the solutions and then might create their own problems, or you could try to tweak little things along the way. A variety of solutions are possible.

One thing I would say is that while it is the case that proportional systems tend to be associated with greater levels of diversity, that link is still dependent on a commitment from parties to put forward diverse lists of candidates. We often talk point to New Zealand or Germany, for example, where you have party lists and local ridings, and you zipper in candidates—women or men, or different ethnic groups, or things like that—which can be done, and is done a lot. It doesn't have to be done, though. If that's the issue that the committee sees as being the biggest problem and they want to address that, then we need to ensure that the rules created ensure that this is the priority.

A lot of things can be done without massive system change to encourage women, minority, and aboriginal candidates to be part of the system and to be sitting in the legislature. A lot of the responsibility falls to parties. Parties could do a lot more than they're doing right now to encourage those groups to apply and to ensure that the rules are such that those groups must apply or that they must find those groups.

I know you have a private member's bill in Parliament right now that seeks to penalize parties for not putting forward parity candidates in elections. That's a great way to do it. Lots of folks say they don't believe in quotas. They don't believe in affirmative action. That's fine. But try as we might to fight against quotas, all the evidence is that they actually do work. Once you have those quotas in place, you then lay the groundwork for future generations. We talk about the role model effect and the fact that once you see people in Parliament, you believe you can be there too. It's likelier that you will consider that as a job for yourself. It's likelier that you won't need to be asked or recruited 25,000 times before saying yes. Once we have those quotas in place, the system changes slowly. The culture changes as well, and it's not that big of a deal. Suddenly things are working the way they ought to.

So we might say, “Oh, I don't want to just hire diversity candidates”, or “I don't want to get a job just because I'm a woman”, because who wants to think that? At the same time, we know that all the evidence shows that there are lots of ways you can justify who you hire, who you choose, and who you recruit. It's really easy to use those merit arguments against the groups that are not being seen there. So forcing parties to do this is a really good idea.

Ms. Ruby Sahota: Perhaps I can get a comment on Mr. Ring's proposal.

Ms. Amanda Bittner: I'm familiar with his proposal. I've read it numerous times. It's really interesting. I mean, Robert is one of those students who are very keen and very enthusiastic. That shows through. He worked really hard on his thesis. Certainly I think it has the potential to address some of these things, especially if we are asking parties to nominate more than one candidate per riding. Usually district magnitude is half of the problem when it comes to SMP. We think we're going to nominate one person, and therefore they must be a success, and therefore they must be a white man.

I think there are lots of reasons to think that having a higher district magnitude would change the calculations that parties make, but again, a lot of that stuff is still internal. Part of the problem is recruitment. Part of the problem is that senior party officials have this idea that women and racialized minorities are not successful candidates, even though there's no evidence to suggest that this is the case. All the evidence shows that when women run, they do win. So really, the issue is about recruitment.

The Chair: Thank you.

We'll go to Mr. Nater, please, for five minutes.

Mr. John Nater (Perth—Wellington, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

And thank you as well to our witnesses today. I think it was a fascinating panel discussion.

I do want to point out, in full disclosure, that I have an academic connection with Professor Dunn. I co-authored a chapter in one of his publications, *The Handbook of Canadian Public Administration*, and received a large paycheque for that, $133.33. Academic publishing does have a financial benefit.

I do have some questions for all three panellists, so I'll hopefully get through them all, and if not, I may come back in a future round.

I want to start with Professor Dunn.

Part of your proposal in your brief was maintaining a single-member plurality type of system, as well as regional top-up seats. I wonder if you could maybe elaborate on that a little bit, and whether or not the regional top-up seat might be better focused on a reform to the Senate and seeing the Senate returned to a more regionally based body or a regionally representative body rather than going through a representative change in the electoral system.

● (1340)

Mr. Christopher Dunn: Actually I didn't deal with regional top-up seats in my particular end section or observations. What I did was point out that the basic dichotomy was between the political systems of these three countries, which tend to centralize power, and the nature of electoral reform, which is to decentralize it. So there is a basic conundrum at work, I suggested, with regard to electoral reform, because we have two different directions going at the same time—centralization and decentralization.

What I'm saying is that this conundrum has to be dealt with, and it's especially concerning, I think, for national leaderships that have to deal with this issue especially in their external or foreign relationships, because in no other area, perhaps, is the need for concerted, coherent direction as necessary as in external or foreign relations. You have electoral reform, which has the ability to decentralize the power structure at the national level, and what you have, therefore, is a collision course between the electoral reform and the all-over direction of political leadership, which is to centralize.

I go through a list of items in my paper that point out the nature of such centralization and the need to cohere power among parties or other bodies, so I posed a question. I think that is the nature of the contribution of this paper.

Mr. John Nater: Mr. Ring, you have made a fascinating proposal. I think that, as a discussion point, it can generate a great discussion.

From a practical standpoint, though, Canadians are used to having election results pretty quickly. Within a few hours of the polls closing, they tend to like to see who has been elected and who has been defeated.

How would you propose getting around that change in mindset that it may take a couple of days to do the math, to figure out the situation, or a couple of weeks potentially? We saw that Australia took a fair bit of time to actually figure out whether Labor or Liberal had won that election. How would you get around that mindset shift for Canadians in changing the system as you have proposed?

Mr. Robert Ring: I don't think it would take a few weeks for it to come in, but as you said, it could be a day or two, or it could even come in one night. Right away they'd know the results of half the ridings, and then as the polls closed in one province it could be finalized how many provincial members were elected and how many points were being transferred to the Atlantic region. I think it would be kind of exciting to see it step by step, and the transferring up, and then combining the points in each riding to see how many members were elected to represent the various regions. The polls would have to close all across the country before the last tier is done, the national region, so the results would come in bit by bit and more slowly, and Canadians might have to wait until the next day or two.

I do have the answer to the question from Mr. Scarpaleggia.

I just totalled it up, and of those 32 members, there were 20 Liberals, six Conservatives, five NDP, and one Green.

The remaining two members would be elected to the national region, and they would come from Atlantic Canada. What ends up happening is that each riding would elect two members: one member represents the riding, and the other member represents a larger region. Based on the points transferred from the Atlantic region to the national region, it would likely be an NDP member, and then the last one could be a Liberal, Conservative, or Green. That would depend on the points pooled.

● (1345)

The Chair: Thank you. That's very interesting.

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

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

Thank you to our witnesses for being here. Thanks to the public who have come by. We'll have some open mike time as well, for those who have thoughts that you'd like to share with us.

It's good to be in St. John's today. The Atlantic provinces have come up quite bit, in terms of looking at different systems and their effect.

Thank you very much, Mr. Ring, for not only coming up with a mode, but then trying to walk through what it would actually look like. I'm a maps person. I need to see the thing physically.

Real quick, each party would run two candidates. The ridings would be joined together. I'm assuming for some of the larger rural ridings, you'd also make two rural ones into one riding. Is that right?

Mr. Robert Ring: Yes.

Mr. Nathan Cullen: One member is being directly elected. That's the result.

I'm looking for what the voter is going to see. They're going to see one member directly elected and one get elected through a proportional result by region.

Mr. Robert Ring: Yes, but that depends—

Mr. Nathan Cullen: Region would be the province of Newfoundland and Labrador.

Mr. Robert Ring: Yes, the second member could represent Newfoundland and Labrador; it could be Atlantic Canada or national. However, in the riding, there would be two members in total.

Mr. Nathan Cullen: So in St. John's–Mount Pearl, you'd have two MPs. It would be one riding: one proportional, one directly elected.

Mr. Robert Ring: Yes.

Mr. Nathan Cullen: That's helpful.

Professor Bittner, thank you as well. You both said that we need to identify the problem, which we've spent a fair amount of time doing, because if you don't do that first....

And thank you for mentioning Kennedy Stewart's bill about changing the way that parties are reimbursed from the public. If you don't seek a better and more diverse field of candidates.... You can choose to do that under his bill, but you don't get as much money back from the public. Follow the money, as they say. It's a great incentive for parties. Because there is no electoral system—well, there are some electoral systems out there that really push....

We had a big change in this last election, yet we only saw a 1% gain in the number of women in Parliament. That ranks Canada as 64th in the world in terms of the number of women who sit in our national legislature, which is not what I think most Canadians would have expected or even know about. I find when I relate that Iraq and South Sudan and Afghanistan are doing better in terms of getting women into parliament, most Canadians don't believe me. However, Google confirms it.

I have a question around these trade-offs.

You talked about empowerment of local voices versus local MPs. We have proportional systems, and Mr. Ring has one here, but there are many others, as you know, that still have a local MP. I don't know if I'd see that necessarily as having to choose.

Ms. Amanda Bittner: You don't have to make a choice between those two things. Sorry, I totally interrupted you.

Often we tend to see those two things as being in opposition to one another, but certainly Mr. Ring's suggestion, and other mixed systems, could achieve some of those similar goals.

Mr. Nathan Cullen: I'm looking at voices expressed in two ways.

One is the voice of the voter going into the ballot box and having that voice reflected in Parliament. I think that leads to some of those people being reflected in Parliament—the question you raised earlier—but also that sense of "I have some power here." Voting, as one witness told us, is mostly an irrational act. One vote very rarely ever turns the tide of an election, yet collectively we know it matters.

However, how do we know and feel that it matters if, as in the last election, 9.2 million votes out of the 18 million votes that were cast elected nobody, were just an expression of something else? That's one thing I'd like you to address.

The second thing is—and this has often happened in Canada—what happens where entire regions, major metropolitan groups, are shut out entirely from government, or opposition, or sometimes both, which is a remarkable feat. You have entire groups of Canadians, like with the last Conservative government—Atlantic Canada, or Newfoundland, for example, or the entire cities of Toronto, Montreal, Vancouver, for the most part—or you don't have voices in opposition.... I think those both need attention.

Our system sometimes drives us to where.... There are no opposition voices coming from Atlantic Canada right now. That matters for the country, but also for people who happen to not ascribe to the current government's ideas. This is what we're trying to solve.

Do you have any research or evidence around proportional systems or other systems, other than SMP, first past the post, that can help a country like Canada make sure there is regional representation in both opposition and government, as well as increasing the power of individual voters when they go to the ballot box, to know that their vote is going to matter?

● (1350)

The Chair: Fairly briefly, if you can

Mr. Nathan Cullen: I'm sorry, it was a long question.

Ms. Amanda Bittner: Super briefly, no small task there.

I would say that probably the easiest way to look at this would be doing something similar to Robert's suggestion in that you have ridings where you add proportionality into the mix. You still have a clear regional representative however you choose to elect, whether it's by a system like his, some kind of mixed system, and so on.

The biggest issue, though—this is where the trade-off between that voice that you're speaking about and having a local rep becomes more tangible—is that, unless you grow the size of the legislature, which a lot of folks don't want to do, you end up with larger ridings where a person who represents me here comes from the other end of the island, let's say, or Labrador.

There are a lot of folks who argue that's not desirable. Personally, I'm not that big on regional representation. I think that we are exalting regional diversity over other forms of diversity, and I would actually rather see us prioritize other forms of quotas because that's what the system really does, it provides quotas for regions. We're saying that's the most important source of representation, which I don't think is actually a priority in the same way as I think that other forms of representation are.

Again, that goes to that issue of values, choices, and priorities. You could certainly achieve a local representative along with this larger voice that you speak of, this desire to not have wasted votes if you had a system change. That doesn't guarantee my other bigger priority, though, which is this issue of what kinds of people are getting elected. So, for me, that's the most important issue, and system change could lead to that, but not necessarily. That's where the tension is.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Ms. May.

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

Thank you to the witnesses. I'm one of the lucky MPs, having been in Cape Breton for much of my life. I was not a stranger to Newfoundland and Labrador, and it's great to be back. I think in all my time visiting St. John's, this is the best day I've ever seen. It's spectacular, so I'm feeling very lucky.

● (1420)

Mr. Nathan Cullen: It's always like this.

Ms. Elizabeth May: Yes. It's just that they bring in the fog and the mist for tourists just for effect. Anyway, it's fantastic, and thank you for being here today.

I want to address a few of my questions to Robert Ring. Before I do that I wanted to mention to my friend John about the questions you put to Mr. Ring about lag times. It's easy to think that the PR systems are harder to count, but Australia's system, of course, is the majoritarian alternative vote system, not PR. And, of course, one of our more famous recent examples of a long lag time was first past the post hanging chads in the U.S.

Shawn Fraser, who had been at the University of Alberta—and there are some bright students at university coming up with great voting system ideas—came up with dual member proportional and, when asked how long that counting would take, he said 60 seconds, because he developed the mathematical calculations and the computer program to do it all.

But then your system is different because it has this overlay of the national region. So, before I ask you the next question, have you looked at the dual member proportional system in your research at Memorial? Did you look at the University of Alberta example from Mr. Fraser?

Mr. Robert Ring: When did that example come out?

Ms. Elizabeth May: It has been a couple of years now. It's actually one of the ones on the ballot in the P.E.I. plebiscite. The P.E.I. government picked up on it. It's a lot like yours, but let me go into places where I think it's different.

How many MPs in total do you have at the end of the day, or do you add in order to make your system work with two members per riding?

Mr. Robert Ring: There are a few that are added, just say, for the territories. They end up getting double. Labrador gets another one, because there has to be an even number per province in this system. So, if the province currently has an odd number of representatives, it would be divided by two and rounded up. So, Nova Scotia would have 12 instead of 11, and Newfoundland would have eight instead of seven, and that extra member is for Labrador, because I think it would be important to Labrador to ensure that they have their own riding as well.

To be fair to the north, they would remain as single-member ridings as well, because there would be two members elected in each riding. That would effectively double the representation of the north, but if you're looking at, say, six members out of 340-something, I don't think that's such a big deal.

Ms. Elizabeth May: I'm going to change my question. You've also referred to the national region. Is the national region another group of seats as well as the doubling to make sure that, say, the three territorial MPs are paired so that your system will work with two per riding, or am I misunderstanding the national region?

Mr. Robert Ring: The national region is all the leftover points that didn't reach the 50 mark in the smaller regions. They get transferred up, and it's only at that region where any rounding occurs. If you didn't reach 50 points, if you got 49 points, it would be transferred to the next region, but in the last region there would have to be some rounding. This is why this system is more proportional than other mixed systems because other mixed systems will round at the first top-up region.

Ms. Elizabeth May: When they go to the national region I'm presuming that is another group of members of Parliament who serve at the national region more or less at large as opposed to representing a riding.

Mr. Robert Ring: Yes, by name they'd be representing the nation at large, but they would be coming from the single-member riding. Each person elected would run in the single-member riding, and each riding would have two members at the end of the day. One of the members might be considered a national member.

Ms. Elizabeth May: Do you have any idea off the top of your head how many MPs you would have in this category of national region?

Mr. Robert Ring: Based on this simulation there would have been two from Atlantic Canada, and coming from the other regions it could be in the six to 12 range.

Ms. Elizabeth May: Professor Dunn, I'm trying to squeeze in a chance for you to expand on your point, which I found very powerful, that power shared is power diminished. Professor Peter Russell testified to us that one of the reasons he felt proportional representation was so important was that the Westminster system as applied to Canada has an extraordinary amount of power in our executive. If there's time with the chair's indulgence can you expand on that?

Mr. Christopher Dunn: The point about power being diminished if it is shared is the mindset of the leadership of the national systems. It is a fact of life in the decision-making system with regard to external affairs, the decision to enter wars, the nature of trade agreements. The list goes on and on, and they all demonstrate this one orientation and that is that power shared is power diminished. I haven't seen this point I'm making about the nature of electoral reform and external affairs in any of the literature. I'm wondering why it's not there and why some discussion doesn't take place, because the nature of many forms of electoral reform, namely PR and mixed systems, is toward diminishing the concentration of power in national systems.

The Chair: Thank you.

Ms. Elizabeth May: Mr. Chair, I just want to correct the record, and of course it would explain why Mr. Ring wasn't ringing the bell on this one, but it's the Sean Graham not the Sean Fraser system. I apologize.

The Chair: Thank you for clearing that up.

Mr. Aldag, you have five minutes, please.

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

I'd like to thank all three of our panellists today. There is a great diversity of opinion. It's a great way to start our day here in St. John's.

Professor Bittner, I'm going to start with you. I really liked how you laid out the dilemma that we're facing, the million-dollar question: what is the problem that we're trying to fix? With my colleague Mr. Cullen, you talked about some of it, and with Ms. Sahota, you talked about some. What we're trying to get at is that there's a range of issues out there. It's not just one clear problem but the lack of representativeness, the lack of diversity. There are a number of issues.

One that I heard when I was out knocking on doors during the campaign period was that people had just simply checked out. We've heard about declining participation rates in western democracies. I know that when I was knocking on doors, there were a number of people who felt, as we've heard on this tour, that they have never elected a winner, that their vote has never counted. A woman who came to one of my town hall meetings was in her 80s and had started voting as soon as she could, but had never elected a winner. She was still going strong and she still believed in democracy, but she felt that she wanted to have her vote really count once before her time was up.

What I'm looking at and what I'd like your thoughts on is that we've heard of a number of strengths of proportional representation, and I think there is something there to deal with many of the issues we're facing. However, I have constituents who feel that the current system is working fine.

My colleague Ms. Romanado was telling us that on the way from downtown Halifax to the airport today, they got talking with the cab driver about what we're doing. His question or comment was, “Well, there's nothing wrong with the system; why are you messing with it?”

So there's this broad range of perspectives. We could jump in with a wholesale change and go to a proportional system such as Mr. Ring has given us, or any number of other ones that are out there. We could also step back and say, “You know what? We'll tinker around the edges with first past the post.” Things such as the quotas, the incentives, and mandatory voting could help with participation rates. There are a whole bunch of things.

Do you have any thoughts you can offer us on the best bang for the buck in starting to deal with some of these issues? Do we go with a full-on change of systems to PR to deal with the suite of problems we're trying to face, or should we keep the existing system and do a whole bunch of stuff around the edges that will deal with some of these issues?

Do you have any thoughts or the million-dollar answer?

Ms. Amanda Bittner: You mean the magic bullet.

Mr. John Aldag: Yes, exactly. Please, it has to be there.

Ms. Amanda Bittner: I would say a few things.

First of all, I think you're right that voter engagement is a major problem. It's especially a problem among youth. If we look at the voter turnout rates there, we see it's a huge problem. It went up a little bit in the last election, and that's a good sign.

There are lots of things that we could tinker with that would make the system work better without making major changes. I would say quotas are one, and campaign finance reform is probably also good. I think—and this speaks to Mr. Cullen's observation—the most important characteristic of a parliament is the opposition; it's not so much who's in government. This speaks to the issue of power-sharing to a certain extent, the idea that if we have a strong opposition, we have better policies. You don't actually want to have concentrated power, which speaks to Professor Russell's observation, and we could make lots of analogies to our households. I am happier if my partner and I share power, as opposed to him dominating the household and imposing policies on me. That's not obviously what's happening in my household, but I'm just saying....

If I didn't have any knowledge or ideas or things like that, then I'd be doing a bad job in running my own household, because I wouldn't be participating fully, so having people engaged and having a strong opposition are the most important things. There's a lot of evidence to suggest that the turnout goes up when voters think their voice matters, whether or not it's rational from a economic voter perspective. We know it's not rational; one vote doesn't make a very big difference most of the time, or almost never.

Those are two things I would suggest, as well as more committees that have power. There are a lot of things that you could do with Parliament itself to restructure its operation to make it work better. A committee such as this one, with all parties sitting on it, is a great thing, because it means you're getting all the voices all the time.

Giving you guys power is probably also good. You don't want to be told by the Prime Minister what you have to do once you've done all this work, right? You want to actually think your work is worth something. Empowering legislators such as yourselves, and in particular opposition members, to say what they want to say, to have the resources they need to do their job, to hold government to account effectively is going to make voters think that what they're doing makes a difference. That's because even if you don't elect the winner, you're electing somebody who has a lot of power, because you're electing the opposition, and that's actually more important in some ways than electing the winner.

It's not a magic bullet, but....

Mr. John Aldag: That's great.

The Chair: That's a very interesting point.

Mr. John Aldag: Am I out of time, or do I have—

The Chair: Do you want to make a very brief statement, like 10 or 15 seconds?

Mr. John Aldag: It was more a really quick question for Mr. Ring.

The Chair: A quick question with a quick answer would work.

Mr. John Aldag: It appears we would have more than one tier of MPs in your system. I'm wondering if that's actually the case and if there is any benefit or drawback to it.

Mr. Robert Ring: That's a question that comes up in any mixed system. People can say there might be an issue with having tiers of members of Parliament. It isn't an issue in Germany. It would be something to which the political culture would have to adapt. The idea of a mixed system is used in a lot of other countries. At the end of the day, I don't see having different types of members of Parliament as being a big issue.

The Chair: Okay.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Rayes, you may go ahead.

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

I'd like to thank our witnesses today.

My first question is for you, Mr. Ring.

I'm trying to understand this. Under the system you're proposing, each riding would have two members, and to achieve that, ridings would be combined into twos. Theoretically, then, the member elected in the riding would have twice as big of an area to cover.

[*English*]

Mr. Robert Ring: With a few exceptions, the ridings would essentially be twice as big as the current ridings, and then there would be two members elected per riding, one as the riding representative and the other to represent a larger overlapping region.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Alain Rayes: I'm interested in other details.

Yesterday, I had a little fun. I posted a survey on Facebook to find out where people in my riding stood. I have to tell you it had a bit of a spillover effect all over Quebec. What is emerging quite clearly is that people are extremely attached to their local MP. That confirms what I, myself, and many others think.

I often use my riding as an example. It has 40 municipalities. It would be nearly impossible to double the size of my riding. We spend eight months of the year in Ottawa and the other four months in our ridings. I have trouble seeing how that attachment to the constituents could be maintained under your system.

From people's comments, it's clear that they want their member to represent them. They aren't even mentioning political parties. Once the member is elected, he or she represents everyone in the riding. Whether the constituent coming to see me voted for the Green, NDP, or Liberal candidate, I treat them the same way I would the constituent who voted Conservative.

Under your two-member system, let's say I finish second. Someone outside the riding who came in second could come into my riding as a top-up member based on your proportional formula. Did I understand that correctly?

[*English*]

Mr. Robert Ring: One point there that you addressed is about the riding being twice as large.

Yes, the riding would be twice as large, but there would be two members in that riding. In terms of having representatives, I think it would be better for voters because they would have at least two members to choose from, and they could even choose a member in one of the overlapping regions who wasn't elected in their riding. They could go to any of those members with issues they have. In terms of having an diversity of members to go through, I think it would be more beneficial, because if citizens have an issue that concerns them and they approach their member and that member is part of a party that opposes that position, it might be better if those voters went to a different member—maybe the second member in the riding, or the member in the overlapping region.

I believe there was another question you asked as well.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Alain Rayes: Let's continue with your analysis.

The person who finished second in my riding wouldn't necessarily be the second member elected. It could be the member from the riding next door who received a higher percentage but wasn't the first choice. That person could become the member for the riding. So the people in my riding could get a new member representing them, one they did not vote for, under the proportional formula. Is that correct?

[*English*]

Mr. Robert Ring: You're saying that the person who finished second in your riding isn't necessarily the second person elected, but it will be one person from that riding, because once the ridings are twice as big, it's one riding. The person who places second in that riding isn't necessarily going to be the second person elected from that riding. It could be one of the other members, and it would still likely be one of the ones who finished high, but it would depend on the points pooled in the region.

In Quebec, for example, it wouldn't be all of Quebec. The first region could be regions of four to six ridings, and then the points would be pooled in that region, but once the number of members who will be elected from that region is determined—say, the top-up members—then it's determined which members they will be and which ridings they are coming from. Again, it's a maximum of two members per riding.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Alain Rayes: I'm very clear on what you're proposing, but there's something I still find very troubling. Given all the people who have written to us and the comments we've heard on the ground, I have trouble with the idea that people would accept having someone from a neighbouring riding who they did not vote for become their representative.

I agree with what Ms. Romanado said about the taxi driver. Yesterday, after posting my survey, I received six private messages from constituents essentially asking me why we wanted to change the voting system. They also wanted to know what the other systems being proposed were, as well as what proportional and mixed systems were all about.

Now I'm coming to you, Ms. Bittner. No matter what, I'm going to be short on time.

The Prime Minister is looking for consultants to help him follow through on his election promises. I think you hit the nail on the head: we're trying to change the voting system because it's an issue that received attention in the public space. We are discussing it without knowing what the real problems are; we are trying to find a magic bullet that unfortunately doesn't exist.

The Chair: Thank you.

Ms. Romanado, you may go ahead.

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

[*English*]

Thank you to our three witnesses for being here today.

Thank you to the members of the audience for coming out. It's my first time here in St. John's, and what a beautiful city. I wish we could stay a little longer to enjoy it a little more.

First off, Professor Bittner, I am a happy puppy today. That's all I'm going to say, because if you've been following any of my testimony, I've been looking for somebody to explain that the electoral system that we use is not necessarily the reason that women don't run for politics. I think your testimony today nailed it on the head. It's exactly what I've been trying to get out. There are many reasons that women don't get elected, and let's start with recruitment.

You mentioned what kinds of people are getting elected. I think that's a perfect example. It starts with the parties. Who are they recruiting as candidates? Once they've recruited a candidate under the current system, they have one candidate they're putting forward. If they're putting forward as candidates what we heard described in previous testimony as pale, stale males, which I found quite funny, well, guess what? That's what's going to be reflected.

You said that average Canadians looking at Parliament say, “I couldn't do that. Look, it's a whole bunch of older white lawyers who are all in Parliament.” But when they see school teachers and farmers and women and younger men and aboriginals, they say, “You know what? I could do that too.”

That goes to my point of engagement. On engagement, we're not just looking to increase voter turnout: we're looking to increase people's interest in possibly running for office. Can you elaborate a little more? I know my colleague John talked about the fact that it's not necessarily one change in an electoral system that's going to fix our problem. We have a lot of little things that we can be doing. Perhaps you could elaborate a bit, because it seems as though you're going in the right direction.

Ms. Amanda Bittner: I guess I like happy puppies. That's a good start.

There's no magic bullet, and that's kind of the thing. All of these factors are factors, and yes, it is the case that often in a proportional system we tend to see more women, we tend to see more minority groups, we tend to see a greater dispersion of parties, lots of variety, and we tend to see more collaboration, more co-operation, more coalition governments. A lot of folks think those are good things, and a lot of folks then do see their voices being heard in the governing party as parties share power, in that kind of sense. However, that's not a guarantee, because at the end of the day it's still the parties that are putting forward their lists of candidates, and if the lists of candidates are traditional, then you're not going to fix that problem.

Again, I keep saying that the rules matter and the rules have to be clear. We talk about constitutional reform. We talk about the need for a referendum in the context of electoral reform, for example, and the rules aren't that clear. We have an opportunity to make some rules pretty clear and to tie the hands of parties to force them to make certain kinds of choices because at the end of the day.... I haven't heard the “pale, stale, male” description. I think that's funny, but not all candidates who are white men are pale, stale and.... Well, they are males, but that doesn't mean they are bad. It just means that this is what we've been doing for a long time and we know about the power of incumbency and therefore we know that once you've been there for a while, *on continue avec ça*. There's a pattern that goes on that prevents certain groups from participating and diminishes engagement, participation, interest, and so on, because we just think it doesn't really matter.

I love politics and I love politicians, but the voters tend to equate them—I say “them”, not “you”—with used car salesmen. There's a lack of trust that goes on. Has that changed?

Mrs. Sherry Romanado: I'm going to stop you because you just said something that just went ding, ding. It's the incumbency issue. Sometimes we have ridings that have had the same person in there for years, and they're not going anywhere, so people are disengaged because they think whether they vote or not, that person is going to get in.

If we're going to do reform, what are your thoughts on having a maximum term? We haven't heard this. I'm just throwing it out there.

Ms. Amanda Bittner: I'm not against the idea of a maximum term. I do think that having a maximum term would prevent certain individuals who are doing a good job from continuing, though. There are a lot of folks who wish Obama could continue right now, for example.

Whether you set those kinds of strict rules—term limits, fixed election dates—those are reforms we can make that may or may not make huge changes. At the end of the day, it doesn't matter if you have incumbency. You don't need a term limit to have a different nomination process at the riding level.

The way that our parties work right now—I'm telling you about yourselves—is that it's a very decentralized process. There are riding presidents who have a lot of control over things, and part of the problem is that riding presidents often believe that the white men are the successful ones. We often talk about diversity in terms of trying to appeal to “diversity voters”, but there are a lot of voters who are white like me who would prefer to have diversity in candidates as well. This is a misperception among party elites.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Mrs. Sherry Romanado: Thank you.

The Chair: Mr. Richards is next, please.

Mr. Blake Richards (Banff—Airdrie, CPC): Thank you, and I appreciate all of you being here today.

I'm going to start with Professor Dunn and Professor Bittner.

You were both signatories to a letter in January of last year with regard to the boundary redistribution process here. It stated your disappointment with the House of Assembly in that regard. I'll quote: “It is a long-standing Canadian principle that effort must be made to ensure that redistribution be a fair and non-partisan process....”

Obviously we are not talking necessarily about redistribution in this case, but we certainly are talking about a process that relates to our election system, and I would argue that as it exists currently, this process might not be able to be seen as non-partisan. It is certainly an agenda being driven by politicians, many of whom have come into it with a stated position, a pre-position, on what they want to see come out of it.

I would say we really haven't engaged the public to any large degree at this point. If you look behind you, there are maybe 15 people, and this is the one meeting for all of Newfoundland. Wherever I've been in the country, whether in my riding or elsewhere, this is obviously something that's on my mind, because I'm participating in it as a member of the committee and so I talk to people about it. Many are surprised to hear it is happening. Many say, as we've heard from the other side already a couple of times today, “What's the problem, exactly? Why are you trying to change the system?” It seems to be a process that's being driven by politicians and political parties.

I wonder if you could give us some sense as to how you think this process might be enhanced to ensure there is legitimacy if any changes are made and to make it as free as possible from being politically driven.

I'd love to hear thoughts from both of you on that. Whoever wants to can go first.

Mr. Christopher Dunn: Are you asking about the process of redistribution?

Mr. Blake Richards: I'm asking about the process we're undertaking now with electoral reform. That may have to involve redistribution at some point, depending on what system is chosen. Yes, I'm referring to this process of considering and potentially changing our electoral system.

Mr. Christopher Dunn: The first thing to note is that in order to ensure the legitimacy of the process, there has to be a referendum or a plebiscite on this subject. We have established by our past ventures in electoral reform in this country that not having a referendum or a plebiscite is contrary to the way the Canadians operate. I think to do anything else would be to court illegitimacy or lack of acceptance by citizens. That's my primary observation with regard to that point.

The second thing is a tangential matter, but it brings up a previous question with regard to term limits. Term limits would be unconstitutional. The way our constitution operates it would be contrary to section 3 of the Charter of Rights and Freedoms.

Are there any other questions besides...?

Mr. Blake Richards: I may have some, but I wanted to give Professor Bittner a chance as well to answer on this point about what we might want to do to improve this process to ensure legitimacy and to ensure the proper engagement of citizens.

Ms. Amanda Bittner: My main area of expertise is voters and voting behaviour. Part of the problem for voters is that they often don't have information. Voters need parties as a shortcut. We need you to tell us what you think, because that helps us figure out what we think.

It's perfectly okay to take a partisan stance or even take a stance within the party that conflicts with the party, because then as voters we're getting information that we need to make decisions. I think that having a multi-partisan committee is important, and voters need to know what each of you thinks about things, and especially what your party leaders think about things, in order to make choices.

Mr. Blake Richards: Can I just finish it?

The Chair: We're out of time. Go ahead, very briefly.

Mr. Blake Richards: I don't disagree with you. This is a good process that we're undertaking now, but I'm asking if there is a way we can improve it so that we're better engaging the public. I don't disagree. As politicians, we should be pronouncing our thoughts on it, and that helps voters to be able to determine. How do we better engage the public and ensure they see it as legitimate in the end?

Ms. Amanda Bittner: I feel that every answer I give begins with "It's tricky".

Voters don't know that much about what's happening, they don't know much about electoral reform, and they don't know about systems. When I ask my first-year students what we use, they think we have PR. They have no idea what's going on.

In order to engage voters, we have to demonstrate to them the problems as they have existed so far and what we think the solutions are and then ask them what they think. At that point, they can participate meaningfully. I think that until we tell them what we think, they can't develop their own thoughts.

There are some keen people, as evidenced in this room, who are going to have thoughts no matter what. They are few and far between, and they're unusually fantastic for Canadians.

● (1425)

The Chair: Thank you very much.

We've got to move on. Sorry.

Mr. MacGregor is next, please.

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

Professor Bittner, I've really appreciated your testimony today. I appreciate the fact that you've come today to talk to us, especially on your work regarding women in politics. I'm a father of young daughters and I would love nothing more than to see them grow up and consider a life in politics, although having seen my experiences, they may be dissuaded from considering that.

When we were in Halifax yesterday, one of the first people who came to us was Professor James Bickerton, and he uttered a phrase that really stuck with me. It was the phrase "institutional changes to behaviour", and I'm really glad you mentioned my colleague Kennedy Stewart's Bill C-237. I'm glad that it's actually making the news, because often private members' bills get lost in the mix. I appreciate that the bill would do some great things if passed, but the fact remains that under our current system, we are still depending on the good will of the Liberal government to get that bill passed, and that's a majority government based on 39% of the Canadian vote.

I was wondering if you could give me some of your thoughts on that phrase "institutional changes to behaviour", in the context of our requiring the support of the Liberals' goodwill to get that kind of bill passed, because if we are going to make these changes, we hope they will agree with that bill, but at the same time, it's kind of like the chicken and the egg problem. Do we change the system that elected this government, or do we ask it for permission to get this change put forward?

Ms. Amanda Bittner: It could also be two tandem pathways.

I didn't hear Jim's testimony, so I can't speak to that specifically. I think it's certainly the case that the rules of the game affect how we play, and I suspect that there are probably some governing caucus members who would support having more diverse members elected, including women. I mean, there are some women across the table from you right now who probably would support that.

Perhaps convincing them that it should not be a whipped vote is a possibility, but you're talking about a basic parliamentary structure, and there are other parliaments around the world that operate in a more collaborative way and don't have a majority government usually, right? We're talking about coalition governments, which will then allow parties to negotiate. At the end of the day, it leaves you guys with power to negotiate across bills, discuss, deliberate, and decide what the best policy is and really horse-trade on a lot of things —let's face it.

I think in some ways that leads to better policy, while others might say that they love the Liberal policy. Then actually this is great. We have a government; they do their thing and they get their laws passed, and then it's our turn later on, maybe, if the voters choose us. There's something to that as well, and again, this is that issue of trade-off. Do you want to negotiate every single piece of legislation, whether it comes from a private member's bill or it comes from a governing caucus, or do you want to take turns, if taking turns is what actually happens?

This is the basic question, I think.

Mr. Alistair MacGregor: You said at the beginning that before we embark on solutions, we need to know what our goals are. Do you think the mandate that this committee was given was a pretty admirable goal for us to pursue?

Ms. Amanda Bittner: As a voter, I would say that I would probably be confused about what the mandate is. As a political scientist who follows things a bit more closely, I would say that I think it's a big job you've been given. I don't envy you, in a sense, having to figure out what to do, and I think that's challenging for sure, especially if there isn't a lot of clear guidance up front about the specific problems.

I know there was talk about this being the last election that will take place under the existing rules, and I get that there's a pressure there. I'm not sure that's a mandate, but I don't think that's saying it shouldn't happen.

Is that an answer?

Mr. Alistair MacGregor: Chair, how much time do I have?

The Chair: You have about 45 seconds.

Mr. Alistair MacGregor: Professor Dunn, I just wanted to move on to you quickly. You mentioned the North Atlantic triangle. Canada, the U.K., and the U.S. share similar systems of governance in how we elect our people. We all have strong executives, and that leads, as you said, to a strong foreign policy.

I just wanted to draw your attention and ask for your comments on the government in the U.K. from 2010 to 2015, when that executive branch had members from two parties within its cabinet. It happened under an SMP system, but that is the norm for PR countries. Do you think that diminished the U.K.'s foreign policy during that time, or did it get along in a business-as-usual manner?

● (1430)

Mr. Christopher Dunn: It's a very good question. The fact that the lib-dems were weakened during that process and sidelined is testimony to the fact that the government in place began to act as if it were a one-party government. In effect, you can have a coalition government, but you can have a system in which the dominant party really dominates.

The fact that every government that experiences a coalition in the Westminster system tries to extricate itself as quickly as it can from this "unnatural situation", as viewed in their eyes, is testimony to the fact that they're unnatural from that perspective. I don't think that specific juncture in history demonstrates too much.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. DeCourcey is next, please.

Mr. Matt DeCourcey (Fredericton, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair, and thank you to our witnesses and to everyone here today. It is great to be back to the granite planet.

I'd like to start with you, Professor Bittner.

Thank you so much for your testimony and for providing us with an overview of the problem that we're trying to solve and disabusing us of the notion that there is an easy solution to this problem, that being to enhance diverse engagement in politics, both through the way citizens and voters engage in the system and in the way it effectively leads to greater diversity in the House of Commons and in Parliament.

I will leave reminded of what you said, that greater levels of diversity in PR are still dependent on a greater commitment from the parties to enact mechanisms to ensure that it is institutionalized.

There are two sorts of diversity that I think we're talking about, and my colleague Mr. Cullen touched on it maybe from a different angle. It's diversity as represented in the way people look, meaning men, women, people from ethnic or racialized minorities, indigenous people, people with disabilities, and/or it's diversity in the partisan or ideological leanings that people share.

Do you have any view on both the intersections and diversions of those two sorts of diversities that you can help tease out for us so that we can be a little clearer on how we're trying to address one and possibly the other?

Ms. Amanda Bittner: I think there are two things. In nerdy political science terminology, we talk about symbolic representation and substantive representation, so there's a separating out about how we look from our ideas. For example, we often point to Thatcher. She was a woman, but obviously not great for women.

I would say that both are important. You want to have symbolic diversity, or the diversity in the way that we look, so that we can look at Parliament and think, “I should be there.” However, we also want to believe that people of all parties and all ideologies and all ideas can bring their ideas forward and have a chance as well. I think sometimes those two things match up and sometimes they don't, but they're both important.

I would say symbolic representation is not enough to ensure substantive representation, but also substantive representation is not such a big priority that we can sacrifice symbolic representation, if that makes sense.

● (1435)

Mr. Matt DeCourcey: There's an intricate web linking the two. Sometimes I feel we've all been culpable of mixing the two together, and while they're interrelated and interconnected, they're not necessarily the same thing.

What's the link between enhanced diversity and voter participation or voter turnout in an era when, across western democracies, we're seeing a trend of declining voter participation regardless of the electoral system employed?

Ms. Amanda Bittner: Yes, that's a problem.

I would say too that changing the system or increasing diversity doesn't ensure increased participation and engagement either. There are a lot of things that come together. The question is complex, which is again why I'm not super-envious of your job.

The important thing for me as an instructor, as a political scientist, as a voter, and as a citizen is that I don't think it's good enough to say that because there are progressive white men who believe in women's rights, we don't need women in the legislature. The substantive, in some ways, for me, is less important than the symbolic, although there are plenty of feminists who disagree with me on this.

l think that no matter what, how we look matters. We cannot afford to have a legislature that visibly excludes large parts of the population, and that is a huge priority.

If it's the case that there are women in Parliament who disagree with my particular views, I'm okay with that, because that's the nature of Parliament. There are a lot of people in that legislature who don't agree with my views, but I want to see the potential for people like me to get there—I'm saying "like me" broadly. I'm concerned about women, but I'm concerned about women who are not white in particular, because I think that's an especially large hurdle to cross. They may or may not have ideas that reflect how they look, and that's okay.

Mr. Matt DeCourcey: The key to overcoming that current problem of still lacking in some areas of diversity, in your view, is more by finding ways to either incentivize or discipline parties as to the way in which they help enhance diversity.

Ms. Amanda Bittner: Absolutely.

● (1505)

Mr. Matt DeCourcey: Thanks so much.

The Chair: Thank you.

That concludes our round of questions.

Again, this has been an interesting panel with some well-defined views. You've added to the mill, if you will, of our thinking process on all these issues, some of them very complex, surrounding electoral reform.

We'll break for about five minutes while we prepare for our next panel.

Thank you again for being here. Thank you for that original system of voting and for giving us the results. It was almost like election night at that point.

Thank you as well, Professor Dunn and Professor Bittner. I wish you continued success in your work.

We'll adjourn for about five minutes.

● (1505)

(Pause)

● (1520)

The Chair: We'll get going. Here we go with our second panel of the day.

We have two witnesses before us. We have Marilyn Reid and Mr. Brendon Dixon, who will each present for five minutes.

I don't know if you were here for the first panel and saw how it worked. You were? Perfect.

Without further ado, we'll start with Ms. Reid, please, for five minutes.

Ms. Marilyn Reid (As an Individual): Thank you very much for inviting me here.

I want to start by saying I wholeheartedly support proportional representation. However, I'm here because I believe that the more conventional PR models won't work for Newfoundland and Labrador. We don't have enough seats to achieve real proportionality with traditional MMP or multiple-seat ridings, and I honestly think the Maritimes might have a similar problem. That realization led me to look at weighted voting.

I know other people have done that with the committee, but as you know, in weighted voting, proportionality is achieved simply by applying a weight to each party's vote in Parliament. That can be a weight of less than one if a party has more than their fair share of seats, or it can be more than one if the party didn't get their fair share.

However, I discovered something when I began explaining weighted voting to people. People often said, "I don't like the idea of my MP having a weighting of less than one." I think what they were really saying was, "Why should my MP have a weighting of less than one because of some disproportionality that happened thousands of kilometres away?"

That concern led me to consider a weighted voting system that would be applied at the provincial level, or even subprovincially. The end result would be the same, but by weighting the votes regionally, those thousands of kilometres actually disappear in people's minds—or at least I think they do. Because the reason for the weighting is seen within a local context, the weighting appears more like a fair and meaningful way to make every person's vote count.

I was here for the other presentations, and I thought that weighted voting could almost be applied to a lot of the PR systems at the top, just to tweak them. However, I have my own system, so I'm going to go through it. It requires the addition of a minimum of two top-up seats in each province. It doesn't have to be the same number of seats in each province.

Who would get the top-up seats? Well, if we base it on the 2015 election, the NDP and the Conservatives would each have had to receive a top-up seat in all four Atlantic provinces, because the Liberals hold all 32 seats here. In B.C., if it's two seats, both would have gone to the Green Party, because they were the most proportionally disadvantaged in the 2015 election.

Once the seats are assigned, the parties would appoint the MPs to those seats. That would be based, of course, on who performed the best among candidates who lost in ridings. Then the weighting would be applied to all the seats, both the top-ups and the ridings.

If I could use Newfoundland and Labrador as an example, we now have nine seats instead of seven. In the 2015 Parliament, the Liberals would have had seven of those nine seats, with 64% of the voters. However, 64% of voter support really only entitles them to 5.8 of the nine seats. Every time the seven Liberals vote in parliament, they would be given a weighting that would reduce their collective voting power, or their seat power, to 5.8.

Now, the NDP party got 21% of the vote, so they would actually have a weight of 1.9, and the Conservative weighting would have been 0.9. If you add up 5.8, 1.9 and 0.9, you get a weighting of 8.6. You're aiming for nine, to match the province's nine seats, so the remaining 0.4 can be explained by the independent vote and the Green Party. The Green weight would be transferred out of the province.

Even though the party weightings would be different for each province—and they certainly would be—the end result would be a proportionally represented Parliament. Of course, every time there's an election, the weightings would change. You'd have to make different accommodation for northern territories and small parties, and I have some ideas on that, but for another day.

So what are the advantages? First, weighted voting gives the highest proportional representation of any system.

Second, the top-up seats fix, in a very simple way, extreme regional distortions, such as we've had in Atlantic Canada with the Liberals taking everything.

● (1525)

Third, the filling of the top-up seats introduces the concept of sharing the pie rather than having the winner take all in the top-up seats, because they go to riding candidates. If the concept is popular with voters, I could envision that you would introduce more top-up seats through riding distribution as time goes on, but this is a start.

Fourth, compare the other systems in terms of minimal or no change to the existing ridings. I really want to emphasize that last point, because proportional representation lists were developed in countries with high population densities in small areas, and in its essence, proportional representation makes no allowance for geography. Geography really counts in Canada. If we embrace one of the more common PR systems, there's a real danger that we will alienate or disappoint rural Canadians, who especially don't want to be lumped together with townies or city people in a multi-seat riding, and in some areas of the country we won't even achieve meaningful proportionality.

I believe Canadians will want three things in a proportional representation system: a voting system that is genuinely proportional, a voting system that respects the identify of rural Canada, and a voting system that is simple to understand. I understand how difficult it is to find all three, because there is always something wrong with every system that gets proposed; for that reason, I know you have a very difficult path in front of you and I wish you patience and insight in the challenge you face as a committee.

Thank you for coming to St. John's.

The Chair: We'll go now to Mr. Dixon.

Mr. Brendon Dixon (President, Newfoundland and Labrador Youth Parliament): I'd like to start by thanking everyone for inviting me and my organization, Newfoundland and Labrador Youth Parliament, to come in and speak with you all and testify. We really appreciate it. It speaks volumes about what the government and committees think of youth engagement and youth voices. We appreciate that.

I'm a student here at Memorial University. I'm a political science and history double major. I'm also the president of the Newfoundland and Labrador Youth Parliament. This organization strives to engage youth from across this province and in Labrador specifically. We have a big emphasis on including Labradorians in our program.

We take over the House of Assembly for a few days, and for just a short time we become MHAs, known as MPPs in Ontario. We become the provincial representatives. The government puts in resolutions that we debate in depth, and we propose amendments. The opposition, a very short bench, will critique and will often try to critique constructively, although sometimes it's hard. Sometimes it's not.

Everyone involved, by the way, is an independent member. We do not assign political parties to anyone, but we do assign the seats to make it feel as though you're an MHA. We're a non-partisan organization, so it's very good for us to remain unbiased.

What's really neat about this program and very pertinent to this discussion is that in one year, we actually had a resolution on MMP. We debated it and we ended up having it. It was very interesting. I just goes to show how complicated the question is that you folks have to deal with. One of the debates we got into was on whether we should have the PR system based on a closed list or an open list. Is it a regional? It is a national list? How do you do it? Even here, as youth, we understand completely the difficult task you folks are assigned.

First and foremost, our program strives to engage youth and we also do strive for gender parity within our program. Last year we actually had a 50-50 split of males and females, which was fantastic.

I'm going to leave it there. I found out about this last night and thought I'd give you an introduction. I look forward to all your questions.

Thank you very much.

● (1530)

The Chair: Thank you very much. That's very good. We'll have a good discussion, I'm sure.

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

Ms. Ruby Sahota: Thank you.

Ms. Reid, my first question is for you. To both the panellists, thank you for being here and for having us here in St. John's.

A few people have presented the weighted voting idea to this committee. I find it very intriguing because we don't have to make a lot of changes to the system. However, yours has a slightly different twist on it in assigning votes across the country, or leftover votes, I guess. Can you explain that? I didn't quite catch it when you were saying that some votes for the Greens from Atlantic Canada or from Newfoundland would end up being transferred back to B.C. How would that work?

Ms. Marilyn Reid: I think that would make sense if we think that the Green Party is a national party.

What happened was that in Newfoundland, there were people who voted for Greens, but of course they didn't get any party representation here. Why shouldn't their votes go toward the national representation? It would mean that there ought to be some sort of ability at the national level to take the Green Party vote in Atlantic Canada, or whatever the provinces are, and give it to the national Green Party. It would mean, of course, that the Green Party would be responsible for Newfoundland and Labrador as well, because they have part of our vote.

I don't know whether that answers the question, but I would really like to see that kind of ability. It's proportional representation. They got 0.4% of the vote, or whatever it is, and it could go towards a Green Party candidate who already exists, or the government could look at making accommodations for more Green Party people at the national level.

Ms. Ruby Sahota: I don't know. For some reason, it just seems a bit more complicated than the previous system we were presented with, whereby the local members would still be elected under the current system of first past the post, and then you would take a national percentage of what the parties had received across the board and assign voting power according to that proportionality. Each member of the Liberal Party would have an equally weighted vote of under one, and the NDP would have over one, but it would have the same number of members.

Have you heard of that proposal? Why did you choose to make it slightly different from that?

● (1535)

Ms. Marilyn Reid: I think that with this regional weighted voting, you are going to have different weights.

I'll give you an example. In the 2015 election, the NDP in Newfoundland and Labrador didn't get enough votes, but the NDP in B.C. got too many votes, you could say. That is going to balance itself out exactly in the national Parliament, because we are insisting that the weighting adds up exactly to the number of seats in each province or region. If the Liberal Party has a 0.83 weighting, let's say, it will still have that 0.83 weighting when you take the different parts.

Ms. Ruby Sahota: But individual MPs in the same party could have slightly different weighting.

Ms. Marilyn Reid: Yes, they could, across the country, but it will all add up to the NDP having the correct weighting.

Ms. Ruby Sahota: I'm just wondering whether this could become a problem, because within the same party, we often have opportunities to sit on fabulous committees like this one and travel with the committee. If my vote were to be a little more than my colleague's vote, then perhaps I wouldn't have the opportunity to go on that committee, because there might be a lot of important legislation and bills being passed back home. The same goes for ministers. I don't know. It just seems that the whip's job would be a lot more complicated in trying to figure out whose vote was worth what, whom to keep behind, and whom to send out.

Ms. Marilyn Reid: I think it would be only for voting in Parliament. When it comes to committees, that's up to the party.

The Chair: I think what Ms. Sahota is saying is that when committees like ours travel, they are absent from the votes in the House, so that affects the parties.

Ms. Marilyn Reid: Can't you, with all the modern technology...?

The Chair: No.

Ms. Marilyn Reid: Oh, my goodness. Is there no proxy vote either?

The Chair: No.

Ms. Ruby Sahota: Those are things we should probably look at as well. There are things we have been discussing about making changes to Parliament, but as the current system stands, we don't have any of that, so I think that would complicate things.

Ms. Marilyn Reid: That's something I really didn't anticipate, to be honest.

The Chair: That's fine.

We'll go now to Mr. Rayes.

[*Translation*]

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

Good afternoon, Ms. Reid. Good afternoon, Mr. Dixon.

You just saw first-hand what we have been observing: when witnesses share with us ideas that appear to be simple, those ideas are actually much more complicated when you really look at them—

Ms. Marilyn Reid: I can't hear anything. I'm going to try to understand what you're saying.

There we go.

The Chair: Great. You can start over, Mr. Rayes.

Mr. Alain Rayes: I think you, like many in the room today, just realized that seemingly straightforward ideas or proposals presented to the committee become a whole lot more complicated when we try to apply those ideas to Parliament.

Ms. Reid, my first question is for you. Under your model, are a certain number of members added to the existing 338, or does the number of members stay the same?

[*English*]

Ms. Marilyn Reid: Do you add more members of Parliament? You have a choice. You can add more members of Parliament, you can ask provinces to redistribute their seats, or you can offer a compromise—i.e, we'll give you one seat, and you make a seat within Newfoundland and Labrador.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Alain Rayes: So you don't have a concrete suggestion at the moment. Under your model, you aren't suggesting that the number of seats be reduced in the case of proportional voting or added; nor are you suggesting some compromise. Is that correct?

● (1540)

[*English*]

Ms. Marilyn Reid: I'm not committed to saying that you need to have absolutely two seats per province. If it's of interest to the committee, it's for the committee to decide on two seats per province. I chose two seats because Atlantic Canada doesn't have any Conservatives or NDP members.

That was a suggestion. It's up to the committee, if the system looks at all enticing, to figure out what would be good.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Alain Rayes: Great.

Mr. Dixon, what you said really intrigued me. You haven't spoken much.

From what you're hearing, where do the youth you represent stand on the current voting system and electoral reform? If they aren't satisfied with the current model, what do they propose to improve the electoral system? Changing the voting system? Taking other measures?

[*English*]

Mr. Brendon Dixon: That's interesting.

What are their opinions on the current system? I think the general consensus on the current system among the youth I've spoken to, when they get a grasp of the system—it's a big issue in terms of the education behind it—is this. I had a professor who once described electoral systems as certain...things that are not appropriate, I guess, for the committee. Take “MMP”: it sounds kind of bad. You get all these names, and there's a lot of confusion around it.

I think the first step is that when they do understand how our systems work, you can then proceed to a conversation, but for the most part, most students I've talked to do not want to see the first-past-the-post system. The Prime Minister said that this would be the last election in which we had first past the post. Almost every youth I've spoken to who is knowledgeable about the system, who is educated about the system, voted in the hope that this actually would be the last election with first past the post.

Right now we don't feel our vote counts. I think many youth do feel this way. This current system exhibits this culture of “your vote won't count”. I think for us that's a big problem, because we probably don't feel that we're being taken seriously.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Alain Rayes: I have a question about young people and politics.

How much understanding would you say young people have of the current political system? On a scale of 1 to 10, what level of understanding do 18- to 25-year-olds have when it comes to our current political system?

[*English*]

Mr. Brendon Dixon: Is that on average?

[*Translation*]

Mr. Alain Rayes: Yes. I'd just like to know your opinion; I'm not expecting you to give me scientific data.

[*English*]

Mr. Brendon Dixon: Okay. It's probably 1.5, and I'm being really honest. If you think about it and take a look at the education systems and the curricula that are imposed on students within their systems, and then look at the difference between urban schools and rural schools, you see that the education systems can sometimes differ greatly. The problem is that we're not being taught civics. We have no idea. We have no idea how Parliament works or why we should even care. We can't even answer the simple question, “Why do politics matter? I don't care about that.” We can't even answer that.

In terms of our general knowledge, there's no way we can have knowledge, because it's not even taught in our schools. I took a political science course in grade 12, which was an optional course, and I took it because I'm a bit of a nerd. That's the problem right there. It was an option. I had an option to do it. There was nothing from the point when I was in kindergarten. There was nothing from grade 1 to12. Nothing. I think once you start looking at that as your fundamental problem, then maybe we can move on this idea of how we engage people and how we get people interested in politics.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Alain Rayes: You've just confirmed what a number of youth groups have told us. In their view, the biggest priority, even before we get into thinking about electoral reforms, would be to provide civic education. If they had that education, they may not be as favourable to changing the voting system, given that young people have trouble understanding the one we have now.

I bring it up because, when we talk to people and ask them what they would really like to see, one of the first things that emerges is the connection to their local representative. Under a proportional voting system, that aspect is, to some extent, lost. That what I'm trying to wrap my head around.

Thank you.

● (1545)

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Cullen, over to you.

[*English*]

Mr. Nathan Cullen: I'll continue with you, Mr. Dixon. I may not have heard you correctly. You debated voting systems within the youth parliament. Why is that parliament built without the structure of parties, which exists in all parliaments that we know? Why is the choice made to have everybody sit as independents, government, or opposition?

Mr. Brendon Dixon: I might be a little bit boring, so I apologize ahead of time, but politics is not supposed to be hockey. That's what it comes down to. When you put these ideas of parties onto people, especially youth, I think you can create quite a toxic environment. I think we like the independent stuff more because we get actual discussion, actual debate and discourse on these issues.

Mr. Nathan Cullen: In your testimony, I missed the system that was decided on when you debated electoral reform. You decided on going with MMP?

Mr. Brendon Dixon: Yes.

Mr. Nathan Cullen: How did the referendum go?

Mr. Brendon Dixon: We didn't actually talk about.... Do you mean the vote, or the idea of a referendum?

Mr. Nathan Cullen: Yes, the idea—

Mr. Brendon Dixon: The idea of a referendum, yes. That wasn't brought up at all. I think if we were to have a discussion, that would be an entirely different discussion. I don't think anyone would have been opposed to it, but referendums, especially in this context, do present a number of issues.

Mr. Nathan Cullen: I wonder if you folks sat down and first had to discover what the bias is within the system presently, and if that bias creates problems. As you said earlier, a lot of young folks are maybe not aware of the system. I'd say that if you say “first past the post”, most Canadians know that as well as they know “MMP” in terms of what the system means. They don't necessarily know. It is what it is.

You said earlier about youth votes not mattering or counting. Then when young people are walked through the different systems and find one where their voice is strengthened.... Is there some particular combination with young people perceiving that they're not listened to in general, and then when you hear about a voting system that discounts half the votes cast in an election, it's almost like a reinforcing feeling?

I'm asking you to be a lay psychologist here. We often hear from young people, and we're trying to engage with them. I go to a lot of schools and I go to youth parliaments, and their perception is that no one listens. They haven't come to that point in society where people are listening to their opinions. Then you lay that on top of a voting system that is biased so that a lot of voices are just not listened to. Is that why young people you deal with are open to the idea of electoral reform, changing the voting system so that individual voices matter more?

Mr. Brendon Dixon: Part of the debate was that we would feel a bit more empowered if our vote counted. I think when you're growing up, you do want to feel like you matter.

During this debate and discourse, that was actually part of it, that your vote will matter and people will listen to you. Then when we were walked through the system, that was....

Mr. Nathan Cullen: I want to say that was an attractive feature of going through that.

Do you have any opinion or did you discuss the idea of voting age? That's one of the terms this committee is also dealing with. It's presently 18, with the contemplation of lowering it to 17 or 16.

Mr. Brendon Dixon: There's actually one member who fervently fought for lowering the age of voting to 16. He's been a huge proponent of that within this organization, and we've always debated it.

I think generally people do like the idea that if you start allowing people from a young age to vote, they get more engaged in the process. Look at Scotland and what they did with their referendum. They dropped the age to 16, and they empowered more youth to get out and have a say.

I guess I'd have to argue with psychologists, and they would know more than I would, but by the time you're 16, you have some semblance of an idea of the kinds of issues you face within your country, some very vaguely, but you would have some idea.

● (1550)

The Chair: Go ahead.

Ms. Marilyn Reid: Perhaps I could make a point on that. I'm a retired high school teacher. I think one of the biggest problems in our province is that any kind of talking of politics has been expunged from the curriculum, particularly the senior high curriculum. They got rid of the democracy course. They got rid of the world problems course. They got rid of the global issues course. We're supposed to turn all of our students into good workers. There's no place in the curriculum to talk politics. When I looked at curriculum across the country, I saw a similar....

We don't have the breakdown of our province for 2015, but in 2011, only 29% of our 18- to 24-year-olds voted. We were the lowest in the country, but it was only 39% for the country. I think the idea of lowering the voting age is really good, but only if you then put into the education system or reintroduce the concept of talking politics because it's just nowhere now and almost impossible.

The Chair: Thank you.

We'll go to Ms. May, please.

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

Thanks to the witnesses for being here.

Thanks to the people in the audience.

I hope I have a chance to get to more questions for Brendon Dixon. I want to say how impressive it is to see youth who are engaged. You said you did it because you're a nerd, but I think you did it because you're a good citizen.

I'm going to ask a few questions of Marilyn Reid because I found a column you wrote in the *The Independent*. I hope it isn't unfair to ask you questions about the two electoral reform sessions you went to that were on the Avalon Peninsula. I guess they were held there by the two MPs, Nick Whalen and Seamus O'Regan.

I wanted specifically to ask you a bit more about the mood there and what you saw there, because I see there was discussion of online voting and there was discussion of reducing the voting age. I gather in two different sessions you were the only person who thought a referendum was a good idea. I wondered about it.

Do you have any observations about those two sessions? I would be very interested.

Ms. Marilyn Reid: One session was with Ken McDonald. His riding is more of a rural riding—that is my riding—so the makeup of the audience was much older. It was really noticeable that they wanted to talk about things we could do to the present system. Did we want mandatory voting? Did we want to lower the voting age? Did we want online voting? Those were the questions that came up.

Seamus' and Nick's session was held at the university, and they were mostly young people. There was a huge difference. Every single person in the room was for proportional representation—every single person. I was the only one who wanted a referendum. They gave excellent reasons they didn't want a referendum, and it was that in the last two referendums they felt the process failed, so we don't know how to do referendums.

It was very interesting. The young people were against online voting. They said it was too risky. I think on mandatory voting people were iffy.

I don't know whether that tells you what it was like.

Ms. Elizabeth May: In your brief, you've set out that you think we should hold the referendum, if we hold one, accompanying the 2019 election. We were told by Marc Mayrand that a stand-alone referendum would cost $300 million. You're suggesting that we want to make sure there's a lot of money for public education, so clearly there's a really significant cost to a stand-alone referendum as opposed to having money for public education about why we're changing the voting system. But implicitly in your brief, although you didn't actually say it, doing it the way you suggest would mean that the current Prime Minister would have broken an election promise to ensure that 2015 is the last election held under first past the post.

I personally worry about the level of public cynicism and skepticism about politicians keeping their promises. I also have a lot of skepticism about whether we'll get this chance again after an election in which someone has made the promise. What happens when it's no longer a campaign promise? Do we get back to it ever again?

Do you have any comments?

If there's time, I'd love to hear from Brendon on the same point.

Ms. Marilyn Reid: I'm ready to backtrack on the referendum. My heart says to have a referendum, but it really needs to be done with a lot of effort. If it were done properly, I think it would be a way of reinvigorating political participation in this country. I really think it could be very exciting, but you've just raised the issue of money. There are all sorts of other issues around it, so I'm less concerned with breaking Prime Minister Trudeau's promise than I am with just asking if it could fail if it's not done properly.

I wrote that brief before I met the 30 people in the room, so I'll backtrack.

● (1555)

Ms. Elizabeth May: I wasn't trying to make you backtrack.

Brendon, can you jump in?

Mr. Brendon Dixon: I'm actually going to speak more on my own personal opinion on the referendum bit, coming from my background of political science. I think that we shouldn't be putting a price on democracy, first and foremost. I think that's very dangerous, and democracy is one of those prized institutions in our country that we should value. Putting a price tag on it and being scared to do something because of the price is worrisome.

When it comes to doing a referendum, I don't think it is such a bad idea, but I think with the lack of education and how hard it is to educate during a referendum period, what you would have to do—and I don't know if this is even legal to do—would be to keep your options to solely the systems you'd like to change to rather than include first past the post.

The government has a mandate to no longer have first past the post, so I think you can make the case and the argument that, if you're going to do a referendum, on that ballot should be the systems you'd like to see implemented rather than the old system.

Ms. Elizabeth May: If we were to do that, how would you see that in terms of the amount of effort for public education to make sure people understood those options? I mean given what you said—and that was very powerful testimony and also backed up by Marilyn Reid as a former high school teacher—if you're looking at public education and the school systems have been.... That's my experience too. Local Liberal high school clubs or Green high school clubs are not allowed in any of the high schools. This is provincial jurisdiction, but they really don't want politics in the high schools.

Given that democracy is important, what kind of public education do you think can be done for your generation and for older people who also have no idea about what voting system we currently use or what ones we might want to change to?

The Chair: Give a brief answer, please.

Mr. Brendon Dixon: Don't do it during a referendum or an election; simply put, don't do it.

I forget which prime minister said it, but elections are not the time to be educating people on these issues. It's not the time. You need to be doing it anyway beforehand and afterward. You need to revamp the school education system. That's what needs to be done first and foremost, not relying on groups like mine to be doing all the work.

The Chair: Thanks.

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

Mr. John Aldag: Thanks.

Ms. Reid, I'm going to start with you. In your opening comments, you brushed over territorial weighting, and I don't know if that would apply to some of the large rural ridings in the provinces as well, but when I look at your brief, I see that you talk about considering a model put forth by Brian Eddy in his submission to the committee.

Ms. Marilyn Reid: I didn't hear that last part.

Mr. John Aldag: In the written brief we have, it says that we could consider looking at a written brief by Brian Eddy. I tell you, it's all starting to run together and I don't actually remember what the brief was by Brian Eddy. I don't even recognize the name.

Could you start by telling us how you would deal with this?

Ms. Marilyn Reid: I went through all the briefs. I never thought I would be presenting to the committee, but did you notice that they're all men who...?

In his brief, he suggested that each riding have three members of Parliament, one who would actually go to Ottawa and the others who would be divided between the other two parties. Whenever the MP would go to Ottawa he would have to have the agreement of all three. In other words, he would have to have more than 50% support, so he could not be governed by the whip in Ottawa, or the Liberal Party, or whoever, because he would have to go back to his other two MPs.

I thought that would be a wonderful system for the north, because if there is one area that doesn't fit first past the post, it's the north. That was what I was thinking.

● (1600)

Mr. John Aldag: Okay, perfect. It wasn't ringing a bell with me and I needed that refresher.

I was going to direct this one to Mr. Dixon but with your experience as a high school teacher I'll get you to weigh in on it as well. We started talking about this whole idea of disengagement, and fortunately we have campus clubs and we have some of the political nerds who get involved in this and follow it, which is fantastic. But in my experience dealing with youth, there are a lot of youth from a wide range—I'd say from 18 into their early thirties—who are just not engaged in politics.

I would like your thoughts on how we create relevance in the absence of civics education? When I was out door-knocking and campaigning, whenever I had somebody in that 18 to 30 demographic who opened the door, I was greeted a lot of times by them saying, "I'm not going to vote". I would try to explore and encourage people to do it, and people either didn't see themselves reflected in it or they didn't see the relevance.

I would try to find things from our platform. One I've used before is that I'd say to them, "Well, the previous government is going to change the retirement age to 67 from 65," and they didn't care. That simply wasn't the connector.

Mr. Nathan Cullen: I could have told you that.

Mr. John Aldag: Things like enhancement to financial aid for post-secondary education was great for those wanting to go to school, but there were a lot of youth who simply wanted to get on with getting into the workforce, making money, and pursuing other dreams.

I throw this out to both of you. How do we try to gain greater political engagement among our youth? What are the messages and the connections, based on your experiences?

Mr. Brendon Dixon: We need to be able to answer the simple question, "Why should you care about politics?" When I look at the TV, I see that, as the other member stated, we always use pale, stuffy white men, or something.

Mrs. Sherry Romanado: Male, stale, pale.

Mr. Brendon Dixon: Male, stale, pale; that's what we see. We see people who can't keep their promises, don't keep their word, lie to us, and do all kinds of things. It turns us off. All this pettiness turns us off.

We don't have any real reason to care about the idea of politics, what this is, and why this is actually real. In terms of history and our political culture, this is really important, but we have no idea why this should matter. Figure out how to answer those questions first, and then figure out things that youth care about and go for that.

I think the Prime Minister's youth council is a fantastic start to a bigger, longer, drawn-out conversation.

Mr. John Aldag: Ms. Reid, do you have any thoughts?

Ms. Marilyn Reid: I think it has to start with curriculum. I really think that you have to put politics back into the curriculum, and it won't work unless you start there.

I'm part of a group that has been lobbying the department of education in my province for the last two years to get politics back in the curriculum. I can tell you it's very difficult. They're co-operative, but it costs money and it takes a long time. It can be very discouraging.

Having said that, I will tell you also that within the school system at the moment, debating seems to be out. This is amazing because—

The Chair: From my own point of view, debating seems to be one of the doorways into an interest in politics. It's too bad that extracurricular activity is not more fervent.

Ms. Marilyn Reid: I'll give you another example. We came up with this idea because we were grappling with these problems.

What's the one time the school is a community? It's during morning announcements. We came up with a "question of the day" idea, which would be largely political, multiple-choice, and would enable the home rooms to compete with each other. What we found out is that in many schools they don't have announcements anymore because kids don't listen. They're just posted on the boards.

There's a real problem. It's not just the curriculum; they're doing their own thing.

● (1605)

The Chair: There are many factors.

We'll have to go now to Mr. Nater.

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

I want to begin with Ms. Reid. I very much enjoyed your presentation. As has been mentioned before, we always seem to have slightly new things each time we come together. I was very fascinated by your proposal. I might come back to the proposal, but I want to start with what you wrote in your brief. I know you backtracked a little bit on the need for a referendum, but in your brief you proposed a two-step referendum, which I believe is similar to what was initially done in New Zealand when they changed their electoral system.

I was wondering if you might briefly walk us through your thinking behind this two-step referendum.

Ms. Marilyn Reid: I'll look at what's happening in P.E.I. at the moment, where they have five different models. It's a small island. The people are great and they vote. P.E.I. has the best voters in the country, but they have to choose between five things. I think that really favours the status quo, which is first past the post.

I think we need to decide if we want first past the post or proportional representation. I'm assuming alternative voting isn't going to be there, but I could be wrong. That's the first question, because if you then are grappling with proportional representation being too complicated..., so I had a part A and a part B. First was "Are you for first past the post or are you for proportional representation?" Then within proportional representation, I gave the voters two choices. If alternative voting was on there, that would be one of the choices, but there would be no more than two choices.

I'm really interested in what P.E.I. is doing because they're doing the opposite, and it will be really interesting to see how it works there.

Mr. John Nater: We are going to P.E.I. tomorrow so it will be fascinating to hear from the witnesses tomorrow.

You mentioned briefly the alternative vote. Could you walk us through why you don't think that's a—

Ms. Marilyn Reid: I think it's biased towards the party in the middle.

Australia doesn't have a party in the middle. It has two major parties, so it's not a problem. We have the Conservatives, the Liberals, and the NDP. With alternative voting, if the NDP candidate is discarded and the second choice votes are taken, what are the chances they're going to vote Conservative? I don't think so. When the Conservative votes are discarded, what are the chances they're going to vote NDP?

The CBC did a study of the 2015 election and what the results would have been had we had alternative voting. The Liberals would have had 40 more seats. They would have had 66% of the seats with 39% of the vote. I honestly don't think that you can choose an electoral system that favours one party. It doesn't in Australia, but it would here.

Mr. John Nater: I don't want to put words in your mouth, but you're talking about context mattering.

Ms. Marilyn Reid: Yes.

Mr. John Nater: You can't pick and choose.

Ms. Marilyn Reid: Exactly.

It's the same thing with the proportional representation systems. What works wonderfully in other countries.... We have a unique geography. That's my point about that.

Mr. John Nater: You mentioned that the population density is completely different and that would have an impact as well.

Ms. Marilyn Reid: Absolutely.

Mr. John Nater: I might come back to you if I have time.

I want to ask Mr. Dixon a couple of questions.

You talked a little about civics education more generally. Again, I don't want to repeat what has been said, but I think that is such an important aspect.

When we were in Montreal we heard from Rémy Trudel, a former provincial cabinet minister. He talked about the idea of a referendum as a good opportunity for education. I want to get your input on that from an educational perspective.

Ms. Reid, you can chime in on that as well because you did mention that it's important to take a two-year period at least to have the educational component to go along with the new system.

I want to offer you both an opportunity to comment on that.

Mr. Brendon Dixon: I'll go first.

Going back to my point about referendums, I think it was Brian Mulroney actually—

● (1610)

Mr. John Nater: It was Kim Campbell who said that elections are "no time to discuss serious issues".

Mr. Brendon Dixon: With referendums, essentially, the conclusion is a vote.

I think that because of the amount of mud-slinging that can come out during an election—we just need to look south to see that—the amount of misinformation that comes out during a referendum, and the capacity to fearmonger, which tends to happen in referendums as well, it is a pretty bad time to be....

Just look at the Brexit vote. All this education, all this material, and all this information came out all at once. I personally think, and maybe there are some people who would concur with me, that if people had had more knowledge before the referendum, maybe we would have ended up with a different result. You had all the fearmongering and misinformation come out, though, and no one really knew what was going on.

I think that in times of elections and referendums, you're in a whole different world. I think it is a very bad time to start educating. We should be educating people beforehand anyway.

The Chair: Thank you.

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

Mrs. Sherry Romanado: I'd like to thank our two witnesses for being here.

Again, to the members of the audience, some of whom were here earlier, thank you so much for being here. I'm looking forward to the open-mike session as well, following this.

Ms. Reid, I'm looking forward to reading your brief. We actually just received it, so I will be reading it for sure. It looks interesting, but as my colleague Ms. Sahota said, it's in the practice or in the applicability of a voting system that we will see the consequences of doing this.

One of those things is, in fact, the votes in the House. If we have different weights for different members of Parliament, the ability of a member of Parliament to miss a vote, then, would probably depend on the weight of his or her vote. If you have a high-weight vote, you're likely not going to be sitting on any committees, versus somebody who has a lower-weight vote.

I'm just speculating, but in terms of applicability, we'll definitely check that out. Maybe we'll be able to flesh some things out.

I've spent my career in education, so hearing from youth and from a retired teacher in education is something that's very important to me. We don't have any control over provincial jurisdiction. As education is in fact a provincial jurisdiction, we can recommend until we're blue in the face that civics courses be reintroduced, but at the end of the day it's not our jurisdiction. We hope that will in fact happen, but we'll see. We can all champion that cause.

I'm curious about the knowledge that our youth have of the current situation. Mr. Dixon you mentioned that it is probably 1.5 out of 10. My concern is where they are getting their information from. I'm just flipping this on its head.

When we were in school and we had civics courses, it wasn't partisan, party-based, or advocacy-based. It was very neutral. We've now seen a whole generation of Canadians who are getting their information from the Internet, advocacy groups, and political parties. Quite frankly, I don't think they're getting the full information. They're not getting the good, the bad, and the ugly on everything.

What happens is you have.... I'm not just saying you. A lot of folks go on the Internet. It's on the Internet, so it must be true, right? They go on the Internet and they get this information. They don't get all sides of the story. Then they're out there championing a cause without a lot of knowledge. As a politician, I didn't know anything beforehand. I thought I knew a lot. However, only when you are actually in it do you realize this.

Whose job should it be to educate Canadians about our electoral system? We have so many folks who don't know, yet they're out there advocating for a change. That's my concern. Those who are coming to these meetings are folks who have a vested interest and/or have heard from partisan or advocacy groups. Whose role should it be to educate Canadians? We can't force the provinces to do it.

Mr. Brendon Dixon: It should be Elections Canada, an independent body that I think is world renowned for its ability to conduct elections. As a citizen of Canada, that's my thought on Elections Canada. That's one area, but again, I see your point.

I'm inclined to agree on the amount of misinformation from all kinds of sources. I saw a video where there was one MP who asked the Prime Minister a question and only one part of the clip was shown, but if you watched the rest of the clip, it wasn't actually that bad. Teaching where to get your information from is another big mess. That comes down to schools, provincial education, and Elections Canada.

● (1615)

Mrs. Sherry Romanado: I'm going to put this on its head. You said you took a course when you were in grade 12, a poli-sci course. It was optional and you had nothing prior. Somewhere along the way, something piqued your interest; something there said, “Oh, I like politics.” Maybe you were born a political nerd, but somewhere, somehow, you were exposed to the electoral process.

We heard from a witness that it starts at home. Bring your kids to the polls. Talk to your kids about the importance of our electoral system, about democracy, being involved, and so on. I think it actually starts before high school. I'm going to ask both of you, but I'll let Ms. Reid answer first.

As a teacher, you probably saw the difficulties of trying to educate students who weren't getting that basic information at home or not being exposed to it. Could you explain?

Ms. Marilyn Reid: I'll give you a very surprising statistic from the 2011 election. In the province of Saskatchewan, they broke it down by age, and 99% of people aged 65 and over voted in that election. That is incredible: 99% of the men; less of the women, I think. At the same time, if you looked at the 18- to 24-year-olds, it was the second lowest in the country.

I've heard the argument, and it was made to me when we were lobbying the education system, that really it's the home, the family's responsibility, but it doesn't seem to be happening. Those 65-year-olds went through when medicare came in, so they know how important democracy is. To their grandchildren, it doesn't mean a thing. So yes, ideally it sounds as though it should happen in the home, but it does not. Again, I go back to the school, and I agree, Elections Canada; and also I think there's a role for the CBC.

The Chair: Thank you.

I have to go to Mr. Dixon very briefly, because we're really over the time here.

Mr. Brendon Dixon: I'm an odd case. It wasn't in the home, but I think being more politically aware comes from all kinds of different things. Let's talk about things we can control, rather than things we can't control. I think that's what this conversation should be about.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. MacGregor.

Mr. Alistair MacGregor: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

I'll go with you, Mr. Dixon.

This is my first time being elected and last year's election was a marathon, but I always love getting out on the doorsteps and really engaging with people. When I talk to people who have been in politics for a long time and talk to youth, to tackle that problem of youth engagement, it seems to be a vicious circle. Politicians generally want to be efficient with their resources when they're out canvassing, and because youth don't tend to vote that much, they don't get politicians engaging with them. Unengaged youth tend not to vote, so we just keep going around and around in circles.

What I've found is that when I talk to youth, more often than not, I've been pleasantly surprised at their level of political engagement. It may not translate into them showing up to vote, but when I talk to them about the issues that matter, I've been pleasantly surprised at how knowledgeable they are and really passionate about the issues they care about.

When you look at the system, the way it is right now, it's obviously not working. We do need to do more. Could you give me your thoughts? When youth today look at political parties, what do you think they see?

● (1620)

Mr. Brendon Dixon: You're all the same. I think that's probably what they see. They can't see the difference.

Mr. Alistair MacGregor: Okay. Do you think that is a problem that's born out of the electoral system that we have or out of the parties themselves? It's getting back to that vicious circle. What do you think needs to be the change to get that going?

Mr. Brendon Dixon: That is an internal change within party structures and party co-operation. That's more of a cultural change than I think an electoral system change.

I do think that changing the electoral system could help if you forced everyone to get along, co-operate, and work together. I think then you'd probably see more of a shift.

Let's talk about history for a second. Canada and the U.K. have traditionally never had to have parties working with each other, and that's in Canada more so than in the U.K. I think the U.K.'s first minority government in a long time was in the last election they had, even before this one—

Mr. Alistair MacGregor: Yes, in 2010.

Mr. Brendon Dixon: —where the Liberal Democrats had to help the Conservatives out.

When you force parties to co-operate, then you can see the culture change a little, but I think when it comes down to it, we're not used to it. We're not used to having to co-operate.

I know there's a lot of co-operation that happens behind the scenes, but from a citizen's perspective, we don't see that. If one party says, “Dogs are good”, then the other party thinks, “Because they said that, we say dogs are bad”. That's what we see on our end, and I think a lot of youth see that divisiveness rather than the parties trying to work together and co-operate.

Mr. Alistair MacGregor: Absolutely.

Marilyn, if you had any thoughts on that particular subject, given that you've been involved in teaching, could you add something to that, as well?

Ms. Marilyn Reid: I think it has to be done by young people, in the sense that speaking with someone with grey hair is not that effective with young people. It's your generation that needs to do it.

I suppose that sounds like a cop-out, but it's the reality that you can talk to them better than we can. I just think it's a long-term process, and we have to start talking about it. We need an intergovernmental conversation between the provinces and the federal government, and a major issue to me is that our young people aren't voting.

That's why I think it would have been great if a referendum could have got everybody excited, but I'm told it wouldn't work that way. It's unfortunate that it costs too much money, or whatever, so I'm throwing it back to you.

Mr. Alistair MacGregor: We shall take up the torch.

The Chair: For a question and comment, go ahead.

Mr. Alistair MacGregor: I think anything else I would bring up would go over my time limit, but I wanted to say that I really appreciated you both coming today.

I think every politician has that willingness to engage with our youth, but the structural system sometimes is the roadblock. There is a lot of goodwill in the House of Commons. One of the great things about being a new MP is getting to meet other new MPs and even some of the veterans. It's a fantastic learning opportunity. We've all been duly elected by our individual constituencies, and everyone gets into this job because they want to do good for their constituencies, but I think we have a structural issue at play.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

We'll go to Mr. Richards.

Mr. Blake Richards: Thank you.

I just have the one question for now. I know we're getting nearer to the time that we should be doing the public portion, and I know that's the part we're all looking forward to the most.

I'll turn to you, Ms. Reid, although it seems that you're still grappling a little with potentially changing your thoughts on it. You mentioned in your brief, and I'll quote from there because I thought it was a good quote, “I believe that something as important as electoral reform ultimately has to be taken to the people and I support holding a referendum on whether to retain our First-Past-the-Post...system or introduce Proportional Representation.”

I bring it up not, as most of my colleagues would assume, to talk about referendums. That's what I talk about quite often because I think it's an important issue. I actually agree very specifically with that point you made there. However, it's more to talk about what we're not hearing about, and that is the idea of a ranked ballot. When we've had these open-mike sessions, there are many supporters of mixed-member proportional, and others who are supporters of some other type of PR system. First past the post seems to be the other system that comes up as something that people want to retain.

I know when I surveyed my constituents, it was overwhelming how many hoped to retain the first-past-the-post system. The one thing we're not hearing from very many people is the idea of a ranked ballot. In your brief, you mentioned that it's something that shouldn't be included as one of the options, and you've given your reasons today for why that is.

I guess the point I'm making is that we have this choice to make as to whether we would retain the system we have or go to some other type of proportional representation. Those seem to be the options.

In order to make a change to a proportional system, there's likely a lot of change required. We've heard from the electoral officer that he would need a significant amount of lead time. We're getting close to where we're running out of the time to be able to do that. It might leave only something like an alternative vote or a ranked ballot as an option.

The sense I get from you—and I want to verify this—and the sense I think we get from many people, is that rather than rush this you would want see a long lead time for a referendum, the educational component. I think Mr. Dixon would seem to agree with that.

Is it more important that we get this right, or that we rush to meet the timeline that's very quickly approaching?

● (1625)

Ms. Marilyn Reid: I think it's not just having a two-year lead-in to a referendum; it's government fully being committed. There has to be a big emphasis in the education system. I would see citizens' assemblies taking a big role—very different from the role they took before—in going out to communities and to community groups and talking about all of the options.

With respect to the ranked ballot, I'm not at all opposed to ranked ballots within proportional representation. That's quite different. However, ranked ballot, Australian-style, has a bias. When I raised that issue with them at Nick's and Seamus's session, people were shocked when I gave the CBC report. People who were supporting ranked ballot were shocked.

Mr. Blake Richards: I appreciate that, but I'm not quite certain I heard the type of response I was looking for there.

I appreciate the information that you gave. That was all helpful. I guess what I'm getting at, and we're quickly coming to the point where this might be the case, is that if the choice is to do it quickly and limit ourselves in terms of what the options might be and what it looks like, is it more important to accomplish this before the 2019 election, or is it more important, if it takes more time, to get it right and make sure we've chosen the right system for Canada?

Ms. Marilyn Reid: I will answer.

If there's a full commitment from government to do all these things that would engage the public, I'm for holding a referendum. If there's no commitment, and there wasn't the commitment in B.C., and there wasn't a commitment in Ontario, then I am definitely not.

Mr. Blake Richards: I appreciate that.

Thank you very much.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Richards.

Mr. DeCourcey.

Mr. Matt DeCourcey: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you, Ms. Reid and Mr. Dixon.

I will point out, on the issue of ranked ballots, that there has been public commentary from proponents of PR—Arend Lijphart, Brian Tanguay, Dennis Pilon, and others—to suggest that we can't presuppose that the results of a previous election campaign can be superimposed onto future results, because everything takes place in the context of a new system, with new issues at play.

I would venture a guess that the Liberal Party would not have been the second choice of a lot of electors in 2011. We need to just always be mindful that we're talking about electoral systems over the long haul here. There's a whole other layer, and layer, and layer, of context that we need to be mindful of when we're thinking of how we want Canadians to engage with the voting system and to engage with their elected officials.

Brendon, I'm interested in chatting with you a little bit more about voter turnout. What was the experience like this past election at Memorial University?

● (1630)

Mr. Brendon Dixon: That's a really good question.

First off, I just want to say, if I've ruffled any feathers, that I have a lot of respect for everyone around the table. Thank you very much for having me.

With regard to your question, Elections Canada came in and had voting booths on campus, and we saw a huge increase. I would argue that when you look back and break it all down...or actually, I don't need to. There were huge lines waiting for these voting booths. They were all students waiting to cast their votes.

I think the voting booths at the university played a huge part in how our results in St. John's played out. That's what would I say.

Mr. Matt DeCourcey: In a period of declining voter turnout, especially amongst young people right across western democracies, who are saying that politics just doesn't matter to them as it doesn't change their day-to-day lives and who are wondering why they should vote if their vote doesn't count, what was the difference in 2015 that led to a striking increase in young voter turnout?

Mr. Brendon Dixon: I have to be really diplomatic here.

Mr. Matt DeCourcey: No, you don't need to be that diplomatic.

Mr. Brendon Dixon: I think it was the tone of the election. I actually wrote a little piece on this in *The Independent*. It was more about change, trying to get rid of a government that was around for a long time. I'm not criticizing the government or anything, but when a government is around for a long time, the shelf life expires after a while. People tend to get tired.

I think that's what drove a lot of people out this time around. It was a different kind of election, one where there was a lot of positivity in terms of messaging. I think that played a huge role.

I don't really want to confuse being able to vote with actual engagement. Actual engagement does not just start and end at the polling booth. Engagement is something that is more like a continuous thing, as you probably well know.

Mr. Matt DeCourcey: You started down the road of telling your story when my colleague Sherry asked you about how you first became engaged in politics. I mean, we all have our own story. I want to hear yours, if you're willing to share.

Mr. Brendon Dixon: I started off getting interested in history and then getting involved in my community, working with people who were a bit more impoverished than I was. I volunteered with Junior Achievement. I was always wanting to help people and stuff.

I didn't grow up in a political household. We didn't talk about politics. I was the only one. I was the odd duck in my house. I always had a real passion for it. That's why I said I'm a bit of an odd case. I don't want to reflect it as being a framework to get a citizen engaged in politics.

Mr. Matt DeCourcey: All right.

With the time I have left, Ms. Reid, you mentioned the potential for CBC to play a role in engaging Canadians in the democratic process. I've had these conversations with members of this committee. Ms. May and I have talked about the role that CBC can play. I grew up in a household that was always watching or listening to CBC, but millions of Canadians aren't tuned in to CBC and receive media that can accentuate the divisiveness of what may not at times be as divisive a political culture.

How do we manoeuvre given those realities?

Ms. Marilyn Reid: It would be with great difficulty. I mentioned CBC because we have it still, so because we have it, let's use it. We can't use those other sources, if you like, as easily. It's just overwhelming. I think people are so overwhelmed with what's on the Internet at the moment, there's a difficulty in focusing. We'll put an event online and we'll get all sorts of Facebook likes and people saying they're coming, and maybe 5% will come.

People are so engaged online that they just can't quite get out into the street to do the protest. I don't know how you deal with that. The Internet is something precious that everybody loves, but it's not leading to community.

● (1635)

The Chair: Thank you very much.

That brings us to the end of this segment. I would just like to say that this was very interesting. We had a really focused discussion on youth and engagement. We haven't had it quite like this, done in this way or expressed in this way at our panels.

Ms. Reid, all I can say is that you must have been a really great teacher. Your passion and commitment for education and for making life better for young people continues in the role that you're playing now.

Mr. Dixon, I think you have a good future in politics. You're very eloquent and you're equally passionate. You also know how to deliver things that people may not want to hear in a very nice way, so that nobody takes offence. I think that will take you a long way.

Mr. Brendon Dixon: Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you both.

We'll go to our short public input session now.

Thank you very much for being here. I have a list of about seven people. I'll explain to those in the audience how we've been doing this so far. It has worked very well. Intervenors are allotted two minutes to present their points of view. We'll have two people at the mikes at any given time. One person is speaking and the other person is gathering thoughts to be the next to speak. Then when a speaker leaves a mike, I'll invite another person to come up and wait for a turn to speak.

I invite Mr. Fred Winsor and Ms. Helen Forsey to mikes one and two, please.

Please speak fairly close to the mike, so we can hear you well.

Go ahead, Mr. Winsor, for two minutes.

Mr. Fred Winsor (As an Individual): My name is Fred Winsor and I'm a policy advocate for various groups in Newfoundland and Labrador. One of the things that I worked on recently was this whole idea of trying to get the school system to teach civics. It's sort of a mind-boggling thing really. I thought that these kinds of things were being carried out and they weren't.

I think it's very encouraging that you folks are here. It's very emotional for me. I think it makes us a much stronger country and it's very, I guess, encouraging, more than anything else. Because Canada, as a country, is so large, you don't really understand it until you travel across it and live in various parts of it. It is very much in sectors, and this kind of session brings it together. It may not be what we all would like to see it to be, but it is what it is and as a result I think it's very positive. It's money well spent.

Thank you.

The Chair: That's nice to hear. Thank you very much for those comments. They're very encouraging for us.

● (1640)

Ms. Helen Forsey (As an Individual): I'm Helen Forsey. I live in rural Newfoundland for three months a year, and in rural eastern Ontario for the other nine months. Democracy definitely needs some form of made-in-Canada proportional representation. I realize it's not simple. I realize that even more after listening today, but it is necessary to go that route in some form.

I liked witness Marilyn Reid's criteria, when she said it needs to be as simple as possible to understand—at least I think she said that—and that it has to take into account rural people and sparsely populated regions and areas. That's an adaptation of some of the systems that are out there that wouldn't work well for Atlantic Canada and for other rural parts of Canada. Whether Ms. Reid's or Mr. Ring's proposals, that's the sort of thing I hope the committee will take into account and consider very seriously and come up with something that has all the benefits of all those systems and none of the disadvantages.

Certainly, I'm opposed to the ranked ballot or alternative vote for the various reasons that have been put forward. The results are not proportional. In my opinion it's worse than first past the post, partly because it's so deceptive.

Say no to electronic voting. It's too risky. It's vulnerable to hacking, to errors like the Phoenix payroll system, for example, to malfunctions, to power outages—as a rural person—manipulation and coercion. For example, within a family, if somebody wants somebody else with less power to vote a certain way, a youngster or a spouse, and is looking over their shoulder while they vote...no, I think it's too vulnerable.

Say no to a referendum. This is a complex issue. Referendums don't generally work well for complex issues. I think the work you're doing is what needs to be done: the thinking through, the listening, the consulting. Thanks.

The Chair: Thank you so much.

Ms. Kathleen Burt (As an Individual): Hi. I'm 61 years old and I've had a chance to vote in 26 elections, both federal and provincial. Provincially my vote has counted 25% of the time and federally it has counted 0% of the time, so that's led me to become an advocate and a supporter of Fair Vote Canada.

I know that Fair Vote Canada has already submitted a report to you, so I'm not going to repeat that, but I'd just like to tell you that I'm a hopeless idealist. I still believe in government for the people by the people. Right now we have government for business by big corporations, but I believe in democracy. While I don't believe that voting is necessarily the most important part of democracy and certainly not the only part of democracy, it does have a very important job: to elect our government.

As a lover of democracy, I have always been interested in politics, like Mr. Dixon, from quite a young age. I've always taken part in political things for as much as my time, money, and energy allow. I have spoken about this to both my MPs, Scott Simms, when I lived in that area, and now Ken McDonald, who is currently my MP. I certainly advocated for proportional representation with my neighbours and my own political party and I have attended meetings to support it.

The most important thing to me is that we have diverse voices. We need a strong opposition to have good democratic government, and that includes a strong, vigorous, and free press, which we no longer have. That is one of the reasons we have a lot of voter disengagement, because right now I feel—especially in the last election—it was like prom queen and king voting all over again. We weren't really voting about issues. We were just voting for the most popular candidate.

● (1645)

The Chair: Could you just wrap up? Do you have a concluding remark to make?

Ms. Kathleen Burt: I would like to just say that I definitely agree with what Marilyn Reid and Mr. Dixon were saying about the lack of curricula in the schools to support a democratic system.

The Chair: Thank you for that cogent presentation.

Next, we have Mr. Greg Malone. It's very nice to see you.

Mr. Greg Malone (As an Individual): Thank you all for coming to St. John's, and thank you all for the work you're doing. We have apparently wanted this work done for a long time. For about 100 years we've been talking about electoral reform in Canada, I think. But governments, of course, don't like opposition, any more than corporations like competition. Governments like power; corporations like profit. They both try to minimize opposition and competition but we want to maximize both.

Democracy is subverted at every level. The first-past-the-post system is incomplete. In a way I think that's what's discouraged a lot of voters in the past two decades. Democracy is subverted through rotten boroughs and gerrymandering. Hitler was elected, so you can do anything with democracy.

In Canada, the first-past-the-post system, that open system, favoured the Chrétien government for a decade, while the right was divided with two parties, the Reform and the Conservatives. Then it favoured Mr. Harper when the left was divided between the NDP and the Liberals for that time. Even though during those decades, maybe 60% to 70% of the population was leaning to the left, they had a government that did not represent them. So you had people who did vote, young people who voted, maybe once, maybe twice, and they did not see any results from their votes or any representation from their votes.

I think that seeing that big gap was quite discouraging for that generation. The fact that they pulled out doesn't mean they're not political. They're differently political, and they voted for rejection and non-involvement. That is a vote of disengagement and that has its weight, too, on the political system. I don't think we want to see the consequences of that any further than we already have.

Yes, I'm totally for voter reform. We have to be careful, also. The Newfoundland referendum of 1949 was a fraud, let's say. I don't consider myself legally a Canadian, and there's a great point to be made for that. It was probably the most fraudulent referendum in our history. It resulted in our being consumed by Canada. Our fate in Canada was much the same as our fate with Great Britain. As a large jurisdiction with a small amount of population, we vote for people, not for jurisdictions.

The collapse of the cod fishery was a consequence of our small vote because the cod fishery, of course, was managed by the large jurisdiction, by Canada, but it's a resource that is vital to a small jurisdiction, which is actually a large jurisdiction. We have 500,000 people trying to run a place with 6,000 to 10,000 miles of coastline, if you consider Labrador as well. You have 10,000 miles of coastline to administer. That's a particular job of those 500,000 people.

When it comes to protecting the fishery they can't do it, of course. They're out-voted by Quebec or out-voted by Ontario who wants to give away fishing quotas for car plants, or wheat sales, or whatever it is. That is in fact what happened in the 1970s. We didn't have the votes to stop Quebec or Ontario or Alberta voting away those quantities of fish, and in the end a resource that belonged to this province, of course, was decimated because we didn't have the votes to hang onto it.

You get the situation where a large jurisdiction with a small amount of people is run by an absentee landlord, landlocked Ottawa. Of course, DFO is running it, but that's another whole story.

There has to be some sensitivity shown to small populations running a large territory. They're not just running a city. They have a lot of concerns that other jurisdictions may not have when they have the votes and the power over it.

● (1650)

The Chair: Essentially in terms of a voting system, are you coming down on the side of proportional representation?

Mr. Greg Malone: Yes.

The Chair: Okay, thanks.

Do you have maybe one more concluding comment?

Mr. Greg Malone: I'd like to.

I can understand about 50% of what's being said, and I know people around me are in the same position. My hearing is not what it used to be, but it's not that bad. It's the 21st century. It's not your fault either. You rent a room for a conversation, and you're competing with ceiling fans and furnace fans and air conditioners. It's quite quiet, by the way, out in the ante room. There are no fans at all.

But in here we're labouring to hear everything while the fans are continuing to take our attention. Make sure in the next room you rent you have something on your rider about the noise level in the room so that you can hear a normal conversation. They'll turn off the air coolers and the fans and the air conditioners so that you can hear people.

The Chair: Thank you

Mr. Malone, you can also use these earpieces. There's no need to use them only for translation. For example, in the House of Commons, a lot of people wear their earpieces and not for the interpretation. They just can't hear anything. It's like a shopping mall in there. The acoustics are terrible.

Mr. Greg Malone: Do you have them for the audience?

The Chair: Yes, they're here. You can get them at the back.

Mr. Greg Malone: Okay, like the 3-D glasses.

The Chair: Yes, that's right.

Ms. Power, go ahead please.

Ms. Mary Power (As an Individual): I have to say that I'm a single parent. My kids are in the 24 to 30 range now. I dragged them to every vote I could drag them to. I took them on marches. I discussed some of the politics with them. They don't vote. There's nothing in the schools. That's pretty simple.

I'm also poor and mentally ill. I represent the physically handicapped, as well. Through the years my vote has not counted. That's why people are disengaged. The corporations have more power now than they used to. The elite have more power. I've been watching. I pay attention and a lot of people don't. When you're struggling to survive, you don't have a lot extra to put into other things.

I'm for proportional representation. First past the post never gets.... We never get heard, ever.

That's about all I have to say, except thank you very much for doing this. I have been to numerous town halls, so I'm really hoping this has an effect. You're doing your job, and I want to thank you. I think if your hearts are put into it, then it will come out.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you very much. We appreciate those comments.

Go ahead, Mr. Reichel.

Mr. Kelsey Reichel (As an Individual): Hello to all the members of the committee. Thank you for all the work you're doing and welcome to Newfoundland, where it is like this every day, by the way.

My name is Kelsey Reichel, and I'm from Carbonear. I'm going to say a few words about why I think Canada needs to adopt a proportional representation system. Before I do, though, I'd like to speak to the idea of holding a referendum on electoral reform. I disagree with this for a couple of reasons.

First, I've heard that it would cost around $300 million, which would be an unnecessary expense for something that should not be put to a referendum anyway. It's my understanding that referendums are meant only for matters related to the Constitution, which to the best of my knowledge does not apply to electoral reform.

Second and the more important reason that I am opposed to a referendum is that I believe it is merely a way to protect the status quo. Let's take a moment to appreciate a reality of the situation. Electoral reform isn't exactly top of mind for most Canadians. I think it is likely that if some kind of referendum, whatever that may look like, were put to Canadians, then most people would either have no interest in participating or not be properly enough educated on the complexities of electoral reform to make a well-informed choice. It is best left up to our elected officials to assess what works best for Canada and put that into action.

As I said, this is not something most people talk about around the dinner table. Perhaps most don't even realize there's anything wrong with the way we elect our representatives. It is a complex, confusing, and intimidating subject for anyone who gets involved with it. I'm certainly no expert on anything to do with this, but it's clear to me that there is a problem, if nothing else but for the fact that it was such an important part of the Liberal platform in the last election in running on the promise that 2015 would be the last election held under first past the post. Hats off to the government for getting the ball rolling, as they have.

Approximately 85% of OECD countries currently use some form of proportional representation, with Canada joining the United States and the United Kingdom as the only three still using first past the post. What PR says, in a nutshell, is that if a party gets 20% of the vote, then it gets 20% of the seats in Parliament. With a PR system, there is a fair balance of representation where parties that get a significant share of the vote will have the appropriate number of seats to properly represent the people who voted for them.

It's easy to get bogged down in the details of the different types of proportional representation, and I'm not going to try to do so here today, but they all have much in common. Under a PR system, ridings would be redone in a way that would have several different MPs per riding, usually from various parties. This allows constituents to have an option of who they bring their issues to and that increases the likelihood that they will have a representative whose values line up with their own.

● (1655)

The Chair: That's good, thank you.

I should just add that it's really only in one form of proportional representation that you have multi-member ridings. However, we take your point, for sure.

Thank you.

Mr. O'Neill, you have the floor.

Mr. Liam O'Neill (As an Individual): Hello, everyone. Thank you for coming.

I'm going to try to be very quick because I have a lot of things I'd like to say. The first is that if there's a referendum, the referendum should say, “Should each vote be counted equally?” Currently, they do not.

I would ask you a question, and I'd ask you to answer it in your own minds, because obviously I can't have a conversation with each of you. Would you say that we live in a representative democracy? I do not think that we do. In a representative democracy, each person's vote would be represented equally. The issue of proportional representation is an issue of values. Do you value equality?

In the MMP system, that solves the main problem, but it results in another problem. In a national level, or whatever regional level you adopt, the outcome is proportional, but it does not represent my opinion of who best represents me. It represents which party I would support. In my opinion, the party system is the leading cause of voter disengagement. Proportional representation is not an optional part of representative democracy; it's the difference between representative and misrepresentative democracy.

On the issue of which electoral system to choose, if I cannot express my support for my most favoured candidate without it being wasted, then I cannot accurately be represented in Parliament. I can be misrepresented by someone's ideas, which I believe are maybe less awful than someone else's, but I'm not going to be accurately represented.

STV is the only system which is candidate-centred. That means it's the only system where the candidate is the focus, not the party. If you believe in regional representation, you're not really going to adopt a completely proportional system. If you believe in regional representation, the only system that preserves that and is proportional is going to be STV, single transferable vote. My vote will be such that I can express who I most prefer, but if there are not enough votes to elect that person, my next choice can be elected. Therefore, it can still be proportional. I can still represent who I actually believe is my best representative, but my vote still counts.

You have not talked enough about STV, in my opinion. Obviously, the main focus is proportional representation. That is obviously the biggest problem here. If you're going to be talking about what system you're going to use in proportional representation, the focus has to be on mixed-member systems versus STV, what the problem is with a party-focused system versus a candidate—

● (1700)

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Mr. LeDez, you have the mike now.

Mr. Kenneth LeDez (As an Individual): Thanks very much for fitting me in. I have five small kids and it would be hard for me to get back later on.

I'm a specialist physician and a supporter of proportional representation since at least 1972 or 1973. I've been involved in the Liberal Party since that time in this country and other countries, including the U.K.

An election where the results do not represent the will of the voters lacks legitimacy. It must be a concern to this committee and to all Canadians when you can have a large majority government elected by less than 40% of the people. It's just hard to get away from it. The first-past-the-post system has another hugely divisive effect, which is dividing different parts of Canada. It's possible, for instance, to have no Liberals elected in the province of Alberta despite large numbers of people voting, and no Conservatives elected in Atlantic Canada. This should be greatly troubling to all of us because it creates exaggerated divisions within our country. We have to hope that politics is about working together, with one another, inside and outside of Parliament, to get things done for the good of the country. It's a huge, distorting effect of the first-past-the-post system.

I personally favour a single transferable vote, but there are some problems with it. We want MPs to be elected to represent people, not parties, and we have to find a way to accommodate, in a good proportional system, that connection between members of Parliament and the individuals who elect them. It's nice if they have a choice to go to an MP who they support, but it's also very important that they have that connection. If we have very large electoral districts—say, one electoral district is the whole of Newfoundland and Labrador—one of the distorting effects of that is that if I'm trying to campaign and I'm in St. John's and I'm not hugely wealthy, it's going to be very difficult for me to campaign or have a realistic shot at getting votes up in northern Labrador and Corner Brook. We have to look at the actual systems. Is there some reason we have to have the exact same system in every part of the country? Can we not have some variation, some diversity between different provinces, and even within provinces, to take account of the real geographic issues that affect us?

There are advantages to a PR system. It helps also to make sure you have adequate representation of women, by gender, and by disability. We don't necessarily have to just adopt an off-the-shelf approach. We can try to be a bit creative.

I think referendums can be very divisive, as we saw in Brexit and in Quebec. I think a constituent assembly and involving Canadians and having a real dialogue is the way forward to finding a custom approach and maybe customizing by province and parts of provinces.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Finally, Mr. Chalker, please.

Mr. Michael Chalker (As an Individual): Thank you.

I really have a couple of questions, and I do disagree with the previous speaker because I very much agree with a national referendum or a plebiscite.

In the last federal election, the Liberal Party received 39.47% of the popular vote. Now I would ask this committee, and the Liberal Party, whether they think that is a sufficient mandate to go forward and make such a historic decision for Canada, which has lasting, long-term, legal, economic, and political consequences, without holding a national plebiscite or referendum. That's my question.

On the other aspect, I'm talking more in generics. I would think the Liberal Party, and this committee, believes that Canadians are wise stewards of this country and can make quality decisions in the best interests of this nation. Then it stands to reason that, if the majority of Canadians can do that, we should be holding a national referendum or plebiscite on this electoral reform.

It's not just about first past the post versus something else. When I did the survey last night, it was almost like I was picking menu items, picking a value meal at McDonald's. We need to have something tangible that we can look at and compare, a living, breathing example of success in another nation or nations. In reading from your PDF document posted on the website, it looks as though you have a couple of countries in mind.

Why don't you further elaborate on those countries, tell Canadians what you're proposing, and give us those countries versus first past the post? To me, that's what you have to do out of respect for Canadians; otherwise, I do believe it smacks of elitism.

Thank you very much.

● (1705)

The Chair: Thank you.

Thank you to all of those who made comments. That wraps up our open-mike session for this particular time slot. We have a panel at 6:00, but we'll have an open-mike panel at 7:15. We're going to break for about an hour. We'll be back here at 6:00 to continue with two more witnesses and an open-mike panel.

Thank you.

● (1705)

(Pause)

● (1815)

The Chair: Welcome back, colleagues.

Welcome, Mr. McCurdy, for the third segment of our day of hearings here in St. John's.

It would normally be five minutes, but if you want to take 10, it's up to you. As I said, anything up to 10 minutes is fine, and then we'll go to a round of questioning, where each member gets five minutes to engage with you.

Mr. Earle McCurdy (Leader, Newfoundland and Labrador New Democratic Party): Thank you. I appreciate the opportunity to appear. I've been to many parliamentary and Senate committees over the years. In a previous life, I was once going to one in Ottawa and I had to get a taxi from my hotel. The meeting was in a meeting room in the West Block. I hopped in the cab and said, “Could you take me to West Block, please?” The driver said, “I'm new in the city. Could you direct me how to get to West Block?” So I said, “Well, sir, I believe first you have to get the nomination for the party of your choice, and then you have to get yourself elected. After that, it pretty well takes care of itself.”

Voices: Oh, oh!

Mr. Earle McCurdy: I am someone with a fair bit of experience in casting a vote, which at the end of the day didn't appear to count for anything except the feeling of participating in something when I picked up the pencil. I was certainly pleased to have a commitment that we've had our last first-past-the-post election in Canada.

I'd start with, for me, what the objectives of the new system are. I personally believe we need a change. We've had that system since the day of the horse and buggy. It certainly wasn't designed with the current Canada in mind.

There are a few things I would mention as objectives of a new system. I am more concerned about the fundamental characteristics than about the exact mechanics. I think the important ones are that it fairly translates votes into seats and does that on a national basis, which would therefore remove the disproportionate weight that the current system gives to concentrated blocks of votes on a regional basis. It should be something that retains the principle of local representation as a characteristic of the House, at least in part. It should be designed, which I believe is possible, to help achieve objectives regarding gender, minority, and aboriginal representation, or whatever, and it should be a system where people have the feeling that when they vote, it's going to count, regardless of which district they are in.

If I look at the current system, I see that it has certainly produced major regional distortions. Perhaps the most extreme example I can think of, in my time, of the outcome in seats really being out of whack with how Canadians voted would be the 1993 election. The Progressive Conservative Party—not on the strength of any vote that I cast for them, I might say—had more votes than the Bloc, but the Conservatives had two seats, and the Bloc had 54. There is something about it that just doesn't make sense. A lot more Canadians voted in that election for the party with two seats than voted for the party with 54 seats.

There are other examples. As you probably know, I am the leader of the provincial NDP, and in case you don't, that's who I am. In Quebec, in the 2011 election, our party had an excellent result in terms of votes, but our vote percentage was practically doubled by our seat percentage. The Conservatives in Alberta, over a number of elections, certainly had a strong vote, but they didn't get everybody's vote, and yet they got all the seats in some elections. There are any number of examples where it has really been out of whack.

The worst thing you can probably have is a modest level of support that's spread fairly consistently throughout the country. You can end up with 20% of the vote and not get a seat, depending on how your vote is scattered.

Also, first past the post has produced false majorities in the last two elections, and in a number of others as well, in that governments were elected with a majority of seats in Parliament without enjoying the support of the majority of Canadians in the election.

● (1820)

One of the arguments I've seen put forward for first past the post is stability; you don't have to keep having minority governments, and have another election, another election, and so on. But if you look at what's actually transpired, our average duration of elections since World War II is roughly the same as a whole bunch of countries that have other than first past the post, that have some version of proportional representation, for the most part. They actually had, if anything, in some cases, a longer average term in all the elections since World War II.

The other thing, of course, is, who says a minority government is an unstable outcome? I believe we've had 13 in the country over the years. Our medicare program, our pension plan, and our flag all came about in minority governments, so I don't think someone should necessarily say it's a terrible thing to have.

I realize this is a federal committee, but I thought it might be just a little instructive to refer to results in the last two provincial elections as to how that worked out under the first past the post system. Interestingly, in 2011, a Progressive Conservative government was elected, and last year a Liberal government was elected; and in both cases they had in the range of 56% to 57% of the vote. In both cases they ended up with about 77% of the seats. In both cases, in other words, under any system we would have had a majority government. But what we've had have been lopsided majority governments, which I don't think make the legislature function as well as it could or should.

I'll circulate, at some point, a graphic that shows the 2011 election on top and the 2015 on the bottom, and it shows the actual seat distribution on the left, and what the seat distribution would be on the right, if the seats were distributed in proportion to the votes. As you can see, it would be more balanced, though still a majority legislature in both cases. A particular quirk of the 2011 election is that our party got 24.6% of the vote, I think it was, and the Liberals got 19.1%. They ended up being the official opposition because they got six seats to our five, just because they won three or four cliffhangers, and we lost three or four cliffhangers, or a couple; and although we significantly out-polled them, we ended up as the third party.

I just wanted to make the point that what has happened federally has also happened provincially, as we had a similar, distorted outcome relative to how Newfoundlanders and Labradorians voted, and the seat distribution didn't do a very good job of matching that.

For example, we currently have 31 out of 40 seats on the government side, seven in the official opposition, and two for us in the third party. Had it just been seats by popular vote, it would have been 23 on the government side, 12 in the official opposition, and five in the third party, which, I think, would have the potential to be a much more dynamic and effective legislature, while still having a majority government.

I commented on some of the objectives of what would work. I think one suggestion I've seen in some comment areas is a minimum-vote threshold to get a seat, and I think that would want to be a fairly modest minimum. But I think there still should be one to lessen the risk of extremist or single-issue parties getting representation where that would not be possible in the current system.

If people were to feel that every vote counts, I think there would be the potential to increase turnouts. Our level of turnout now in the country is not anything to brag about. In our province, in the last couple of federal elections, it was the lowest of all provinces, which is something I'm not proud of. I don't think that's a good outcome.

● (1825)

I don't think the system really suggests to people that their vote is going to make much difference and therefore a lot of people respond to that by staying home.

On the issue of women's representation, proportional representation or some form of it doesn't of itself deliver equal women's representation. I do think it provides an opportunity to address women's participation. If you want to add another goal, say aboriginal participation or participation of minorities, or whatever, if part of the makeup of the House was from lists submitted by the parties there could be some criteria put around those lists that would help achieve equity goals.

I think the important thing in terms of what system we would favour would be one that reflects the popular vote, and the specifics of which particular one is a secondary consideration to me. I would think a multi-partisan committee should be able to work out something that fits the Canadian situation. I don't believe in preferential ballot. It retains—and if anything, has the potential to exacerbate—a lot of the weaknesses of first past the post and does not at all show that the outcome in seats will generally reflect how Canadians voted.

On a final note I don't think there's any referendum required here. I think the position of the parties was clear going into the election. I think there's a mandate. The technicality is really a question of what system do we have and what are the principles of the system. Fundamentally, that's to say let's have the distribution of seats in the House of Commons reflect the will of the people as expressed through their vote. I think that's what really counts.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thanks very much, Mr. McCurdy.

We'll proceed to our round of questions starting with Ms. Sahota.

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

We've heard a lot about what the election results would look like if we had a proportional system. Our last witness had stated that this committee has to prioritize what its goals are and figure out what problem they're trying to fix before coming up with the solution that would fix that problem. A lot of us were saying there are several problems that we're trying to address.

One of the most important ones that she brought up and one that is important to me and a lot of people around this table is diversity, diversity of opinion, diversity of women and aboriginals like you were just mentioning, and going for a system that in and of itself doesn't really solve those problems. You would still have to do a lot of other things in order to solve those problems. If that is one of the major problems that this committee is trying to resolve then should we not be looking at something that will improve upon that? It seems to me there are so many factors. Every witness comes here and says, well, it's complicated, there are many factors involved, you'd have to put in quotas, or do other things, and there has to be the will of the party to make these changes. Those are debates we're currently having in the House on how to make that change.

First of all, what is your preferred forum of the proportional representation system and how do you think it gets us there?

● (1830)

Mr. Earle McCurdy: I wouldn't put myself off as an expert on the details of different systems in place in different countries. At a quick glance, the kind of system they had in New Zealand appeared to have some appeal. The mixed member proportional looks like it has good potential, but there could be another system. If we achieve the goals that I put out, I'm not adamantly tied to any one system, but I would think, of the ones I've read...for example, the parliamentary website had a number of them briefly described and of those mixed member proportional certainly had a lot of the considerations.

In our last provincial election campaign, almost a year ago, there was a debate on women's issues sponsored by the local status of women's council. By the way, in the current provincial legislature, 10 out of 40 are women. One of the questions that was fired at the leadership candidates from the audience was, “Can you make a suggestion on how to increase the number of women in elected office?” It's tough in the current system we have, but just quickly off the top of my head, we had just gone from 48 seats to 40 in a downsizing thing the government decided was a good idea and now the boundaries have been recalculated with 40 seats. We could say let's go back to 48 seats, leave the 40 districts like we have them, and for the other eight, mandate that they will be distributed relative to bringing the resulting seats as close as possible to the popular vote, number one. Also you could include gender balancing objectives so that, for example, the result was eight extra seats and you might calculate those out, so that the Conservatives get five and the NDP get three, then we have a 100% women caucus—

Ms. Ruby Sahota: Those seats would be added on to increase proportionality, but how would those 40 first members get elected? Under what system would they get elected?

Mr. Earle McCurdy: The initial 40 would be elected in districts as they currently are. This is just what would be a way—

Ms. Ruby Sahota: Would you elect them by first past the post and then add proportionality seats—

Mr. Earle McCurdy: That's one of the ways. In some of the mixed member models, as I understand them, you elect people in districts in some cases by first past the post and in some cases something else, but then you add on seats to achieve the balance. In other words, you don't take away the concept entirely of local representation in a district, but you say perhaps some of your MPs end up coming in that way and some come off a list submitted by the parties. If the parties had an obligation, for example, to have gender balance on that separate list, that would be one way you could do it. The Conservatives currently use the example that provincially, they got seven seats, six men and one woman. If they had five more to reflect the additional seats, then you could have a requirement that you'd have to appoint women, so they'd achieve balance. I think there are ways of doing it, and that was just an example. I'm not suggesting that as any kind of blueprint, but there are ways you can add to achieve equity objectives.

The Chair: Thank you.

We'll go to Mr. Nater now.

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

I want to follow up on a couple of different points. Initially you talked about the threshold and you thought it should be relatively low, a certain percentage. Do you have a percentage in mind of what that threshold ought to be?

Mr. Earle McCurdy: I have seen five written, and that one doesn't seem unreasonable, but somebody might present a reason why it was unreasonable.

I think we'd want to be careful, or at least not have it so that people who could never get elected were on it. All you have to do is go on social media, there's stuff that gets said in the political discourse that would be better left unsaid and it's inappropriate by almost any standards. If something provided ready access to seats in Parliament for an opinion that could never get elected in any one district anywhere in the country, it would be problematic. Maybe you'd have to get a couple of seats on your own merit to get add-on seats. I don't know. I think there are ways to put that in. I think some countries in Europe have a problem, in that they get some pretty, to put it mildly, adamantly anti-immigrant parties, bordering on a lot worse, that end up with seats because of the structure.

● (1835)

Mr. John Nater: In your comments, you talk a little bit about Newfoundland and Labrador having one of or maybe the lowest voter turnout in terms of a provincial election. Have you given any thought to the concepts of mandatory voting or obligatory voting? What are your thoughts on whether that's a direction we should be thinking about or whether that's the wrong road to go down?

Mr. Earle McCurdy: Let me say this about that. I've thought about it. We haven't taken a position as a caucus or anything or as a party here. I would personally prefer if there were something in that direction, that it be done on the strength of incentives as opposed to penalties. Whether it's, I don't know what it would be, but a pat on the back for voting not a penalty for not voting. It's obviously desirable to get more...and I'm not in principle opposed to the notion of having a requirement to vote. I'm not sure how it would be enforced or implemented.

It's not healthy when you have, I think we had—if memory serves me—57% or some figure like that vote in the 2011 election. That's not a very impressive number.

Mr. John Nater: A few other provinces, British Columbia and Ontario, have had citizens' assemblies in the past for reviews of electoral systems and to make recommendations. Has Newfoundland and Labrador had any in-depth studies done by citizen groups or by any kind of organization in terms of electoral reform?

Mr. Earle McCurdy: Not that I know of. In fact, if there's been any debate on that subject in this province, it has been pretty minimal. There hasn't been a lot of conversation about it.

Mr. John Nater: Does there seem to be a lot of conversation in general on electoral reform in the province right now? We've heard numbers that very few people are paying attention right now. Do you find that here in Newfoundland and Labrador there is a lot of interest in electoral reform, or are people generally tuned out at this point?

Mr. Earle McCurdy: I don't think people are seized with it at the moment. Nobody has really championed it either. I think that's an issue that is more of a leadership issue than something that people are going to get.... That's why I'm not sold at all on a referendum on that. I took the time to read through that material about what happens in a number of countries and tried to at least grasp the basic guts of each of the types of systems. It's a fairly heavy slog. To the general public, it's probably more than they want to commit to. If you have a referendum, they don't really have a detailed understanding, so I'm not sold on the referendum idea.

The Chair: Thank you.

We'll go now to Mr. Cullen.

Mr. Nathan Cullen: Thank you, Chair.

Thank you, Mr. McCurdy, for being here.

I'm glad that you brought a provincial perspective to this. It's appropriate and it starts to help us think about leadership. There have been a number of attempts provincially to bring in some sort of voter reform. There are some that point to national as the place where we have the leadership shown, and what provinces suddenly pick up.

I want to get to the question of that nut that's hard to crack, the low voter turnout, why people turn away.

My colleagues have heard me refer to it many times, so I'll do it again. After the Manitoba election, Elections Manitoba did a study, looked at non-voters, people who did not participate. They had a 57% turnout as well, I think, so don't feel too bad. Within that group, at least half of those voters had the feeling that the outcome was predetermined, that they lived in a certain type of riding. They had become rational about what is an irrational act, which is voting. They had rationally figured that they voted another way than their riding typically did. There's no rational act to go out and vote if it has no effect on the world. This is sometimes called “the wasted vote”. Tracking it back, some people have argued at this table that that's not a wasted vote, that's still an expression of.... You said you shared this similar experience of having voted many times and not seen your vote reflected in any kind of way. We're just looking for motivations for people to participate in our democracy because we know what happens when people don't. We get degraded policy and more cynicism.

Can we make that connection for voters in Newfoundland, where they're going to feel like their vote is going to matter a bit more?

● (1840)

Mr. Earle McCurdy: My gut feeling is that if the seats were a form of proportional representation, or whatever the detail was, then that would increase the turnout. I know I got, especially after our provincial election followed close on the heels of the federal election...and the overlap was painful for our party, because the two were jumbled up in people's minds.

Mr. Nathan Cullen: Yes.

Mr. Earle McCurdy: I had people say they didn't know how this was going to go. People on the doorstep would say, “I'm not sure I'm going to bother voting”, or on election day they came up with cockamamie excuses not to, so I think that would help.

The first time I ever set foot in the gallery at the legislature here there were 39 people on the government side and three in opposition. It was a one-sided vote in that election, but it wasn't that one sided. We've had a tendency with only scattered exceptions to have lopsided legislatures, and in every case, I believe—and I didn't go over them all to say that with certainty—the seat distribution was even more lopsided than the distribution of votes by the electorate.

It makes it tough. You end up with not enough in opposition to have a dynamic legislature.

Mr. Nathan Cullen: When I've been here before, there's a current of alienation—and I don't know if alienation is exactly the right word—about what's going on in the country sometimes by Newfoundlanders and whether the government in power is reflective of the Newfoundlander vote in the last election.

We've seen the famous ABC campaign that was run out of the premier's office for a while, and there were frustrations with certain negotiations and not feeling like Newfoundland's voice was at the table.

We've heard testimony about the importance of having each region represented not just in government, but also in opposition. That matters. Right now, we have a situation where there are no opposition MPs coming from Atlantic Canada. You wonder who Conservative voters in Atlantic Canada would go to if they had an issue where they just happen to disagree with the current Liberal Party, or the New Democratic Party, or the Green Party.

I'm wondering if a proportional system allows Newfoundland's feeling, or inclusion, or connection to the rest of the country, as well as their voice, to be landing both in opposition and government, and if that will help both in feelings, but also in policies that affect the island.

Mr. Earle McCurdy: I think that's very important. I think alienation is not too strong a word. Of course, it has been aided a bit by a tendency to pick a fight with Ottawa when in political trouble. We have in this province elevated that to a bit of an art form.

I think we have had several occasions when there have been seven out of seven Newfoundland and Labrador seats in one party. We had at least one other where it was six out of seven. The vote is never divided in that fashion.

I think it would be constructive. I think the current situation is just not healthy. There are 32 seats in Atlantic Canada, and not a single person from Atlantic Canada can rise in question period as an opposition member to raise a question about whatever is on the minds of Atlantic Canadians. That's not a healthy situation to me.

The Chair: Thank you.

We'll go now to Ms. May.

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

This is the 13th day of a different city every day, but I wanted to cast my mind back. I first knew Mr. McCurdy from his heroic work with the Fish, Food and Allied Workers Union in trying to protect the north Atlantic cod from destruction.

This was first put in my mind earlier today when Greg Malone was testifying. I have been doing a few scribbles and trying to figure out if there is really a link between the MPs we had in the House at the critical period that the Department of Fisheries and Oceans was operating in a way that was guaranteed to lead to the extermination of our commercial cod stocks and the voices in Parliament at the time.

I've just looked at the 34th Parliament, which was in session during the critical years from 1988 to 1993, and we had a very powerful Progressive Conservative who was in charge of that file: John Crosbie. We had another Progressive Conservative and the rest were Liberals. There were no New Democratic Party voices at that time in Parliament.

I'm looking at when you lose the diversity of voices, and there weren't voices inside Parliament as I recall at the time. I was at the Sierra Club of Canada, and I was working with inshore fishermen and others trying to get DFO to reduce the quota so that the cod stocks wouldn't be eradicated.

I don't remember any Newfoundland MPs who were particularly active trying to help us. You have a better memory for this. You were right here at the time. Is it a stretch to think we would have had potentially a different result if there had been more diversity of voices in Parliament in that period, or is that a non-effective concern?

● (1845)

Mr. Earle McCurdy: I don't know if it would have had any impact on policy decisions at the time. That's hard to say. I do believe that it would have addressed, if nothing else, some of the frustration and alienation to have a voice given to the concerns people had.

I think the situation is rife for trouble now with not a single opposition member, and I think even more so. It's hard to say that would have materially affected that outcome when I look at how the decisions were made.

It never hurts to have another voice somewhere to speak up, especially when you have serious issues like the big question mark over the future of 40,000 people who lost their jobs at the snap of a finger. That's epic stuff. It's very important they feel that their concerns are being given voice on the national stage, and for that matter on the provincial stage.

When you have these distorted election results, then I think it acts against that and probably makes a bad situation worse.

Ms. Elizabeth May: One of the witnesses at the open mike last night in Halifax said to us that in a time when you have long-term issues and need a long-term view—like species extinction or climate change—the policy lurches of having a government in for a while and it swinging to the other side with a complete change of policy doesn't work. The kind of voting system—like first past the post—that creates this swing from hard left to hard right, for instance, doesn't work particularly well when looking at issues that require a long-term view, like whether we are fishing sustainably or planning for what is going to happen with climate change 20 years from now.

I don't know if this is something that has ever struck you. I have to say that I hadn't thought of any connection between proportional representation and fisheries policy until Greg Malone mentioned it earlier today.

Mr. Earle McCurdy: I'm a fan of the minority government. I look at what's been achieved in Canada with minority governments, relative to what's been achieved with majority governments, and I would say it worked it out pretty well in decisions made for the common good. I named a few major items earlier.

The current system is this kind of “winner take all” to the point where the previous government approached the election by saying, “What little measures can we put in to appeal to this little particular group, here, so that we can squeeze in a few more?” The target becomes not what's good for Canadians, but how can we push enough in to get to 37% or 38%.

I'm not suggesting that anyone would be necessarily above it, but it's just that this system can lead to people saying, “How do we massage enough votes in enough different places to get over that hump?” If you go from 37% to 40%—whatever party you are—you might go from 110 seats to 180. It's completely disproportional, so you end up with this targeting. It's small ideas when we need big ideas. I think that's what it gives rise to.

● (1850)

The Chair: We'll go to Mr. Aldag now.

Mr. John Aldag: Mr. McCurdy, I want to just clarify that you're here as a representative of your party as opposed to as an individual. I'm going to focus more on the partisan aspect of things, if you're okay with that.

I appreciate the graphs that you presented us. I actually don't know Newfoundland politics very well. It's an area I haven't lived in. I've lived in a lot of the country but not in this particular beautiful province. I don't know things that I probably should, such as whether there has ever been an NDP government or if you've ever formed the official opposition.

When I look at the graphs here, it seems what's being presented is that under proportional representation the NDP would do better than they do under first past the post, at least in the 2011 and 2015 examples. One of the things we have heard is that you can't always necessarily project, and I don't know if you've just taken the numbers and projected them to what it could be under different systems. The point is that if we had a proportional representation system in place, people would behave differently. You may not actually get the projections that you've shown. People will sometimes use that third party as a protest vote, or strategic voting comes into play and all those types of things.

When I look at it, I wouldn't say I'm skeptical, but it seems that the NDP might like this in Newfoundland because it would give them a greater chance of being the official opposition or perhaps even forming government as we saw happen in Alberta. Is it the provincial party's position that PR is what you're advocating for? Have you ever had in your platform that if you were to form government, you would end the current system and go to a proportional representation voting system?

Mr. Earle McCurdy: On the latter point, as to whether it has ever been in the platform, not that I know of. I don't think there has been sufficient public debate for that to be an issue to put into a platform without really trying to stoke a debate first to get it going. I think it's a fair comment that some people might cast a vote differently. By and large, my sense is that most people would vote for the party they want, with some strategic voting maybe to make sure some particular party they really don't like doesn't get in.

In answer to your other question, we've only ever been the third party. We did come second in the popular vote, as I indicated earlier, but third in number of seats. There has been a tendency in this province to have more or less landslide legislatures back and forth. The total number of seats has ranged from 40 to 52 at different times, and there has been a single digit number of opposition members elected a lot of times.

Mr. John Aldag: Okay. On the dynamics of provincial politics here, are there are parties such as the Greens? Federally, I think we were told that something like 26 parties ran in the last election. Do you have that kind of dynamic as well, or is it really a three-party system?

Mr. Earle McCurdy: There have been others, but it's primarily three parties. The Greens had a couple of candidates at least, maybe more, in the last election.

Ms. Elizabeth May: We had candidates in every riding.

Mr. John Aldag: Every riding? I am sorry. I beg your pardon.

Ms. Elizabeth May: We had nobody provincially, but federally, yes.

Mr. Earle McCurdy: Yes, that was the federal election.

Every now and then, there have been other parties. There was a Labrador Party, people who believed that Labrador should separate from Newfoundland. Essentially, that was their position. They got one if not two people elected quite a number of years ago, but essentially it has been a three-party system, with the vast majority of seats being either red or blue.

● (1855)

Mr. John Aldag: If you saw some sort of proportional representation system come in, then those other voices might feel more welcome, that they would actually have an opportunity. Do you get that kind of dynamic within the population in this province, that people feel that there's a greater need for their voice? Do people have that sense of disenfranchisement that we see in the federal system where people vote throughout their lifetime and never have their party elected, or is the split in Newfoundland that everybody gets their turn at some point? Is there the same level of need for change or call for change at the provincial level that we're hearing at the federal level?

Mr. Earle McCurdy: If there was a change in the system federally to something that people looked at and said that was a fair way of doing it, I think that would probably be fertile ground on which to launch a debate provincially as to a change in our system.

Mr. John Aldag: Sorry, the question wasn't entirely clear.

Is there that disenfranchised voice within the Newfoundland and Labrador population that they cast a vote and aren't heard, even though you have three parties that all seem to get seats and play a role within the provincial legislature?

Mr. Earle McCurdy: I have to say that after my first time in public politics—I was in union politics for a long time—the one conclusion I came away with was that people will cast a vote for a bewildering variety of reasons. I'm not quite sure what else to say about it. I think a system where seats more accurately reflected the vote would be received favourably and would enhance our democracy.

But I don't know; that may not answer your question.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Aldag.

We'll go to Mr. Rayes.

[*Translation*]

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

Good afternoon.

Mr. McCurdy, thank you for joining us.

Would you say that, right now, the public is well-informed when it comes to electoral reform and the issues at stake?

[*English*]

Mr. Earle McCurdy: The broad population? Not really.

Mr. Alain Rayes: Not really?

Mr. Earle McCurdy: Not to any great extent. I don't think there has been a lot of debate here on it. There hasn't been any at the provincial level, and I'm not sure how many people follow the debate on the federal system. Politically engaged people do, but people whose participation in democracy consists of voting every four years —not so much, in my estimation.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Alain Rayes: I will tell you that is indeed the case. In fact, according to most of the polls and studies that have been done, less than 3% of the population cares about the issue and understands it.

If I'm not mistaken, one of my colleagues asked whether you would be in favour of widespread consultation in the form of a referendum, once a proposal had been chosen.

That would mean asking people whether they supported the proposal or not. All kinds of scenarios are being considered, but, for the time being, we don't have one to present to Canadians.

Do you think we should consult the entire Canadian population in the event that we decide to change the voting system?

[*English*]

Mr. Earle McCurdy: We have the opportunity for input, such as the opportunity to present here or by other means. I don't think this is the kind of issue that lends itself to, or would be particularly well served by, a referendum. I think the issue is one for Parliament to deal with. I don't think you'd go from 3% up to a substantial percentage of people who'd really be keen and enthused and engaged, who'd study up on all the implications of it.

I personally don't favour a referendum.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Alain Rayes: Professor Rémy Trudel, who appeared before the committee two days ago, in Montreal, told us that referendums were a powerful tool when it came to educating the population before making a major change.

Would you agree?

● (1900)

[*English*]

Mr. Earle McCurdy: It would depend on the issue, probably. There may be some issues where it would—

[*Translation*]

Mr. Alain Rayes: I'm going to stop you there. The issue is simple. A proposed replacement for the current electoral model would be presented to Canadians, and they would be asked whether they supported the proposed voting system, yes or no.

Do you think that would be a good opportunity to educate and inform the public?

[*English*]

Mr. Earle McCurdy: I'd have real doubts about what kind of turnout you'd get. I don't favour a matter that is fairly technical in nature being decided on a referendum basis.

That's a personal view. It's not something our party has dealt with.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Alain Rayes: A number of provinces and countries seeking to reform their electoral system have held a referendum. My understanding is that turnout is quite high.

I have one last question for you, Mr. McCurdy. Let's take the provinces, for example. Let's say Alberta. Right now, the NDP is in power even though the party received a percentage similar to that of the Liberal Party of Canada and the Conservative Party of Canada, in other words, 39%. If we were to add up and combine the votes obtained by the two other farther right parties in Alberta, would you accept the idea of having those two parties form a coalition government in the province, in the wake of the most recent election results?

[*English*]

Mr. Earle McCurdy: I don't think you retroactively change what happened in an election. They ended up with three parties, and, as I understand it, there might have been a fourth, with seats in the legislature. We are talking federally here, but if they had some kind of rep by pop in Alberta, there would be a minority government, just as there would be in virtually every other province. In those provinces, whoever happened to have the most seats would be able to govern only as long as they could command the support of a majority of the legislature. In the event that this failed, somebody else would, presumably, have the opportunity to do so.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Alain Rayes: But, had Alberta voted using a proportional system, the two other farther right parties, together, would have obtained more than 50% of the votes and seats. In that scenario, those two parties would be governing Alberta, on a coalition basis, instead of the NDP, which currently has a majority. Would you support that?

[*English*]

Mr. Earle McCurdy: What I said was that a result that more closely mirrored how people voted would be desirable. We would not have had the outcome we had in the last federal election, either, for that matter.

The Chair: On that note, we'll go to Mrs. Romanado, please.

Mrs. Sherry Romanado: Thank you.

I'd like to thank you, Mr. McCurdy, for being here this evening.

To members of the audience, thank you for spending your time with us. I know electoral reform is fun, so thank you for being here. It's a delight to be in St. John's. I am hoping that maybe later this evening we'll be able to get screeched in, as they call it, for the record.

We've heard a lot about the pros and cons of the various electoral systems. As you know, we have been given guiding principles in our mandate, that whatever we propose or come forth with has to be legitimate, effective, simple, and so on.

We also have a very tight deadline. We have until December 1 to put this into place. If we want to change the voting system we currently have for the 2019 election, time is of the essence. You yourself said that there is a lack of information out there, in terms of education for Canadians. Whatever we do, we are going to have to do a massive public awareness campaign.

Given all those constraints, what form of PR do you think would be best for us to look at, if we were to go that route?

● (1905)

Mr. Earle McCurdy: There are probably an endless number of possible ways of designing it. The mixed member proportional has good features. It might be possible to design a made-in-Canada one that's not exactly the same as any of those, and not exactly the same as what anybody does in any other country, but has similar ideas.

To me, the key thing is, when you look down at the legislature from the gallery, does that roughly reflect how the people in the province, or in this case in the country, voted in the election? I think an outcome that comes closer to capturing that is progress.

I do agree that there would be very significant communication responsibilities associated with the change, to make sure people understand, as best they can, how the new system would work so that when they cast their vote, it can be as informed a vote as possible.

Mrs. Sherry Romanado: On that note, instead of doing something that would include a massive undertaking—such as redistributing the ridings, significant changes to ballots, and so on—would it be possible to do something where we keep the 338 ridings as we currently have them, and we add a ranking so we can assess by the majority question and then add on proportional regional seats, so it's that extra layer on top of the current system? That would satisfy some of the proportionality.

Mr. Earle McCurdy: My understanding is imperfect to say the least, but from what I gather with these mixed member proportional ones is that this is, essentially, how a number of them operate anyway. I think Germany and New Zealand would be a couple of places where you have *x* number of people who were elected to represent districts, but then you have others who were elected from a general list, which I presume is on a regional basis, and that would make sense. You could have a Parliament with 338 members where not all 338 are from a defined district in the same manner they are now. You could have some from that form and some from a list. You could have dual seats where one of the members runs in the riding and one comes from a list. There are any number of possibilities, but I think if the outcome is that the legislature reflects the vote of the people, then I think that's the fundamental goal.

Mrs. Sherry Romanado: I have one last thing. We heard from a Professor Cam in Vancouver who debunked this whole "my vote didn't count" because in that argument he said if that were the case, then every candidate who got at least one vote in the election should technically be a member of Parliament. No matter what electoral system we put in place there is always going to be somebody who doesn't win the election. Let's be honest. You can't elect everybody, right? What do you say to those Canadians who equate that their preferred candidates didn't win equals that their votes didn't count, because that's what they are equating it to. They are saying, "because my candidate didn't win, then my vote didn't count". This is not true, but they feel their votes didn't count. No matter what system we put in place, somebody's vote is not going to count.

Mr. Earle McCurdy: In any election there will be people who win, and there will be people who lose. That's politics. If somebody votes for a party, and they may be in a district where the party they support has never had much luck, then they may live a long time before they see someone from a party they support get elected. If there are additional seats that come from a list that reflects the popular vote overall, then people voting in a seat where their party didn't get elected will still see their votes—and it might be a small one among millions—go into a pile that might help the party they support get an additional seat in the House of Commons. In that way I believe it does.

Somebody who is supporting an independent or a fringe party, or somebody who doesn't have any national standing, might end up casting a vote that doesn't result in anyone getting in the House.

● (1910)

The Chair: Our time has unfortunately run out. Sorry.

Mr. MacGregor.

Mr. Alistair MacGregor: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

I wanted to stay on the regional aspect of this discussion, because part of our discussion is that we all realize that reforming our electoral system is not going to solve everything about our democracy. I think one big thing it can solve is the regional lopsidedness that we get in our elections.

You quoted the 1993 federal election where the Progressive Conservatives got more of the vote share than the BQ, but got 52 less seats than them.

In British Columbia, we had very lopsided results back in 2001, where the NDP was reduced to two seats out of a 79-seat legislature, despite the fact that one in five British Columbians voted for them. They didn't even have enough seats to get official party status, and they had no resources to even be an official opposition.

When you look at the current makeup of our federal Parliament, I want to hear some of your thoughts on having those different regional voices within the parties. Atlantic Canada has 32 Liberal MPs, with less than 60% of the vote going toward that result. I'm sure there are Atlantic Canadians who wish they had some New Democrats and Conservative MPs, just so those caucuses had the most up-to-date issues.

Similarly, if you go to Saskatchewan, we have one lone Liberal MP, despite almost a quarter of the population having voted Liberal. I am sure there are some Liberals who are feeling left out. Minister Goodale has been there for a long time.

I would like to hear your thoughts on that, because I think it's really important for parties to have that broad representation in their caucuses.

Mr. Earle McCurdy: I think those are bad outcomes. When you have a party that gets 25% of the vote and gets one out of whatever number—and I forget what number Saskatchewan has now, but a considerable number of seats with 17 or something—the representation in no way reflects how people cast their ballots, or for the two out of 79, or for any number of examples.

When you have a region, or a province for that matter, shut out in the House of Commons, then that's not a healthy outcome. This is especially so when a lot of people voted for somebody else, and because of the way the first past the post system works you end up with a sweep. With the concerns of people in the Atlantic region now, not one single MP can rise in the House of Commons in question period and talk on behalf of the people of Atlantic Canada. There needs to be an opposition member who's not tied to the whip and who can get up in the House and say whatever the issue might be that's causing a burr under people's saddles in his neck of the woods. There needs to be someone to get up and express that issue, have it on the news, and have people hear that at least being brought to the floor of the House of Commons, with or without a successful outcome. Then they'll at least have their issues raised.

I think that if there were to be some form of a mixed system of some of the members being elected in geographic ridings, as is currently the case, and some would be add-ons to balance out the number of seats, then that can be done on a regional basis.

Whether it be provincial or bigger regions, I suppose, would be a matter for debate. For example, it wouldn't fix the problem if the opposition parties had a handful of seats to pick from a list and they picked them all from some provinces, but not from Atlantic Canada. Then it wouldn't address that problem at all. It would be illogical. I don't think an opposition party would do that, but it would be logical to tie them to a regional distribution in some form to try and not only have the House of Commons reflect on an overall basis the vote, but also on a regional basis.

If 25% of the people of Saskatchewan voted for the Liberals, and the outcome was that roughly 25% of the seats were Liberal, then that would be more reflective of the will of the people.

● (1915)

Mr. Alistair MacGregor: Yes. Our current ballots are very simple to understand. One great thing about our system is that it's very easy to understand. You make your one choice in this one specific geographic area for one representative. Often in that one choice you're having to make three different decisions: who you want as your local candidate, what parties and policies interest you, and who you like as leader.

It seems to me that throwing away those three choices into one thing can leave some people unsatisfied. I think you hit on some very salient points. If you're able to vote for a local candidate, but you also have a second choice to choose a party, then even if you're not getting your local candidate, you know you have that second choice contributing in some way to the national makeup of Parliament.

The Chair: Thank you.

We'll go to Mr. Richards, please.

Mr. Blake Richards: Thank you.

I appreciate the leader of the Newfoundland and Labrador NDP being here today and representing his party.

You've obviously had a chance to give us some thoughts on your viewpoints and your party's viewpoints in terms of the systems and various things that you think need to be there.

I want to back it up a step. One of the things we've heard and probably all share a thought on is that Canada is a unique country, compared to almost any other country in the world, and any system that would be great for Canada would have to be a made-in-Canada type of solution, some kind of a twist, at the very least, on a system that is probably out there now. I wonder what your thoughts would be on that. What would be some of the unique considerations that we would have to consider in designing a system for Canada? What are some of the unique features that would be important in designing a system for Canada specifically?

Mr. Earle McCurdy: I think the regional question is pretty important. It's a huge country geographically, and there are a lot of regional issues, identities, concerns, policies, and so on that need to be accurately reflected. I still think we have to have a made-in-Canada one, but in trying to arrive at that, it's probably not a bad idea to have a look at what is done elsewhere and see whether there is any element of that where we might say, “That looks like we might borrow some of it, if not all of it.” It may be useful to do that, and I think there is a very good chance that we end up with something that's different. I don't think we would just take some other country's system lock, stock, and barrel.

There is an interesting one in New Zealand. As I understand it, they had something like 63 who were elected by ridings, as we elect people, plus 50 or so who were from lists supplied by parties to balance, more or less, the outcome of seats in relation to how people voted, but also seven Maori seats, aboriginal seats. That was an interesting wrinkle. I think something that helps with the gender balance issue and the representation of women in the House of Commons is something that would warrant trying to make some progress on. Language is a consideration, for sure, in a couple of provinces.

If the system is that you elect so many by ridings, and then you fill in the rest from a list, I think that type of system provides some flexibility, some dynamics as to how you fill a seat. Otherwise, it's tough. Parties have district associations that elect their candidate. Unless you had a bunch of dual ridings where there was a requirement to have, for example, a man and a woman, it would be very difficult to achieve that. Each district association has its own autonomy. Leaders can push on that and do what they can to try, but it's tough.

Mr. Blake Richards: Fair enough.

Mr. Earle McCurdy: I think there may be some affirmative action opportunities in some kind of a mixed member system.

Mr. Blake Richards: Obviously, you favour a proportional element to the system.

One of the things we've heard, over and over again, is that there is no perfect system, that everything has its drawbacks. You obviously expanded on what you see the merits being. I wonder whether you want to give us a thought on what some of the drawbacks are, because that might help us make the proper tweaks for Canada. In particular, do you think it would lead to more single-issue type parties, fringe parties, separatists, or regional-type parties getting elected with seats in our Parliament, and would you see that as being an issue at all?

● (1920)

Mr. Earle McCurdy: On single-issue ones, I think that's a risk. That is why I think some kind of a threshold is probably needed. One of the options, I suppose, may be to say that you have to get elected in a couple of ridings in order to get additional seats. I think you could have criteria that would limit that.

On the regional one, not so much. We've seen that at various times, for sure, the most obvious example being the number of seats that the Bloc got in a couple of elections, in particular the one where they became the official opposition by running candidates only in one province. That was a case where, if you take it to the—

Mr. Blake Richards: I'm sorry to interrupt on that, but do you not think that might be something we see in other provinces if we went to the type of a system with proportionality, and would you see that being expanded? Would other provinces maybe vote a specific regional party in with just regional interests for that province? Would you see that being an issue if that were to happen?

Mr. Earle McCurdy: I doubt it. You might. There's still a pretty powerful...if you look at what information voters are exposed to in making a decision on how to vote, then I think that an awful lot still comes back to them seeing the party leaders on television every night. They see them on social media and stuff. A candidate who is not tied to a leader of a national party has a chance to get elected, but it's more of an uphill struggle.

Yes, you might, but I wouldn't think that would be rampant. In the current system, if somebody wanted to say, "We're for the Newfoundland separatist party", then 40% of the vote could get you all the seats in the current system, at least on a proportional representation. It might get you a couple, but it wouldn't get you—

The Chair: Thank you.

We'll go now to Mr. DeCourcey.

Mr. Matt DeCourcey: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

Thank you, Mr. McCurdy, for joining us this evening.

I've listened and listened to other witnesses come before the panel and suggest that moving to a PR system will increase voter turnout. Something I think we want to be striving for is greater voter engagement at the time of election and leading into greater democratic engagement between election periods.

If we look at the statistics across western democracies, whether in proportional systems or in single-member plurality systems, regardless of the type of system, then there seems to be a trend throughout western democracies of decreasing voter engagement and decreasing voter turnout.

Some of that could be due in Canada potentially to fewer people seeing themselves reflected in the Parliament that is elected. I think that is a goal that we have to strive for, enhancing diversity in politics. I had this conversation with Professor Bittner earlier today about whether that means enhancing diversity in the people we see and what they look like in Parliament, with men, women, indigenous persons, persons living with disabilities, and people from racialized minorities, or does it mean people who reflect different partisan views or different ideologies? We had a good conversation about the intersection and the diversion that those diversities represent.

I'm wondering if you have any insight into how we can focus our efforts more on encouraging parties to put forth more diverse candidacies. Professor Bittner said regardless of what system we move to, and even if you move to PR, you still need to find ways to have parties beholden or committing to putting forth more women candidates, more indigenous candidates, and more candidates from ethnic minorities.

● (1925)

Mr. Earle McCurdy: I think the mixed system provides at least the opportunities for parties to achieve that.

Mr. Matt DeCourcey: Any system provides the opportunity.

Mr. Earle McCurdy: Here are the difficulties I see. With the current system, I think all the main parties have district associations that have the autonomy to choose their candidates. As long as you have that, and they each have one seat, then how do you say that St. John's East has to have a woman, or has to have whatever? It's very difficult.

A party could very well have a policy in developing their list, and their list will have some diversity built into it by party rules, because presumably the list wouldn't be developed by a single district.

I assume your district association would have elected, or had the opportunity to pick, the representative, and whoever wins that is the candidate. That makes it very challenging to get balance.

In our party, we succeeded in the provincial election. We had 40 candidates, with 22 men and 18 women, and we very actively and aggressively courted women to run for us, and we came close to—

Mr. Matt DeCourcey: I think that proves the point that can happen under any system, and even my colleague across the way, Mr. Cullen, will I'm sure fill you in before you leave today on the bill in front of Parliament. No, he won't, okay. He's done that enough already. There are ways to incentivize or discipline parties should they make or not make the effort to encourage or see a more diverse slate of candidates run for office and hopefully be elected. As we've seen, when women are able to run for office, then they are able to be elected in equal order to men. That evidence has been presented to us on a number of different occasions.

Just in closing, it struck me when my colleague Mr. Aldag was asking you about the party's position here in Newfoundland that this conversation—as colleagues here around this table will remind us—has been ongoing in Canada since 1920, and yet we're still talking about it. We've had NDP governments elected in different provinces across the country that have not been able, or have not seen the desire, to change the electoral system either. Why is that the case in your mind?

Mr. Earle McCurdy: I think it's a bit of an esoteric issue, and that it's an issue for people who are of interest and are primarily people who actively engage in politics. I knocked on thousands of doors last fall, and I'm not sure anyone brought up proportional representation. It's not a grassroots issue. I guess over time there have been these results that have perhaps contributed to it, but parties ran in the last election saying, “Look, if we're elected, then that will be the last time you'll see first past the post. We're going to change that. We think it's time for a change.” I guess that has evolved over time. I can't say I've studied it closely over the years, so that's just a guess on my part.

The Chair: Thanks very much.

That closes our round of questioning. We really appreciate that you could join us, Mr. McCurdy, to get a party leader perspective on the issue. It is a new angle for us. I think you're the first active party leader who has appeared, and it's been valuable to have your input in that sense. Thank you very much.

We are going to proceed with a short list of people who would like to intervene in the two-minute rounds, but of course, Mr. McCurdy, we are setting you free, and it was nice to meet you.

● (1930)

Mr. Earle McCurdy: Thanks very much, Chair, I appreciate it.

The Chair: We'll get going with this open mike segment with Ms. Ledwell, please, for two minutes.

Ms. Jean Ledwell (As an Individual): Thank you.

I would like to preface my remarks by saying that really I hope our Parliament, aided by yourselves, will take this decision. Just today, for example, in the *New York Times*, there was a fabulous article about the problems with going to a referendum. We've seen examples, and the most painful one we're all aware of now is what's just happened in Colombia.

The referendum may be on what type of voting system we should have, but people may participate in the referendum to solve or make other points, such as political points.

As a committee, I commend you for your work. Over 64% of our parliamentarians elected this time were elected from parties that said they wanted to move to some type of PR system. That's the first thing I'd like to say.

The second thing I'd like to say is that we have a system that was developed and evolved, and it has not continued to evolve. We're evolutionary creatures, and we're living in an evolutionary context in the cosmos. Our system has not evolved. We're still mired in a system that is militaristic, patriarchal, and based on lengths of swords between opposing, duelling parties. This has to come to an end. We are now not in a two-party system, and we're not two duelling elite lords. We are in a multicultural, multi-faceted system. It does not serve us well that we are still clinging to an old system.

I have not been involved in politics directly, but I've been involved in social issues my entire life, as was my father. I have to say that we are not reinventing the wheel here. Other countries and most advanced democracies have some type of a sophisticated system. I'm really speaking in favour of some type of mixed system.

I don't want you to think that I'm not capable. I have done a lot of reading and a lot of study, which is why I decided to say a few words. Women should speak up whenever they have a chance. I think that it's incumbent upon us. As a previous speaker said, it wasn't maybe a doorstep point, but it was a point well taken by many Canadians who feel disenfranchised.

As a person with a significant disability who has had many a problem trying to vote, I think, for God's sake, let's move to a digital electronic voting system soon so we you can just do it simply.

I think it's critical that, yes, it won't solve every problem we have, but it will certainly send a signal to our citizenry that there's interest in having diverse voices, diverse opinions, and diverse faces in our system.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Mr. Brake, go ahead.

Mr. David Brake (As an Individual): Hello.

I gather that you have a number of fine principles. The problem with the principles, and indeed it's a problem of deciding the system in general, is that you have competing principles at stake. If you have to ditch one, then I would say ditch simplicity. We're only likely to get a chance to fix the electoral system once in this generation. Don't go for a system that is easily explicable to people who in any case aren't currently engaged. Go for a system that will do the best job, and go for a made-in-Canada solution that solves as many of the problems as you can at the same time. For example, try to work in better regional representation. I would back the single transferable vote, but that clearly doesn't work for big areas with low populations, so work on that. Come up with a workable compromising solution that other countries haven't tried before because they haven't needed to. Similarly, work on having better representation for first nations people, women, and other minorities. Build that into the system by, if necessary, coercing parties into making lists that better represent people in the system you choose.

My point is these ideas have not necessarily been tried elsewhere, and they may not be easy initially to sell to people and to explain to people in a form of a referendum, for example. That's why we have representative government. You guys have been doing a lot of thinking. You've been talking to a lot of experts. The public has entrusted the government, broadly speaking, with a mandate to change the electoral system for months. For my money, that's good enough for me. I have a Ph.D., and I care about this stuff. I sat down and looked through the material, and I found it quite difficult to come up with my own idea of what I think these things should be. Asking the Canadian public in a limited scope of time to look at what I hope would be a reasonably complicated proposal is just too much.

If it turns out you come up with something that is really difficult and that the public doesn't like, then the public is perfectly entitled to turn around and vote to go back and choose something else. That's where I put my priority.

● (1935)

The Chair: Thanks very much.

Mr. Tarasoff, go ahead.

Mr. Lev Tarasoff (As an Individual): I'm an educator and a scientist, and I want to put forward a broader perspective that was already raised earlier in the context of the issues we're facing over the long-term, so-called, wicked problems of diversity, and climate change, etc. It was a discussion about the impact on the decision-making process. Another aspect we have to look at is the impact on alienation and buy-in. If we don't have an engaged citizenry, then we're going to see what's happening in the States. I don't think the U. S. is going to be well-situated to deal with these kind of problems. In Canada we could be heading the same way unless we have a system that promotes engagement. To me PR would be the only way. There are issues with the mechanics of it. With MMP you could play around with the lists. I think that's where there could be a lot of creativity with add-ons. It could be an open list. It could be people who are running in the ridings. There's a lot of play that I think you could work with. To put that context on, part of your role is going to be selling whatever system you're providing, and putting this long-term perspective on that I think is important.

What I say to my classes is that if you haven't voted, then it's hard to stay engaged if your vote doesn't count. My vote hasn't counted. I just want to contradict the earlier point. I can understand why not everybody's vote gets to count. In PR it would count, right? I've been voting for 36 years, and not once has my vote really counted in a federal election. I would also echo the point that we don't need simpler systems. If you look at the Australian system, it's crazily complicated. Canadians aren't any stupider than the Australians. It doesn't have to be a complicated system, but we don't need simplicity.

The last point is on the mechanics. We don't have to get it exactly perfect. I'm a scientist, and you learn by experiment. If we went with MMP, then I think the issues would be around how you do the lists. You could say we're going try a few different things and explore. It doesn't have to be fixed in stone. They can take that kind of scientific approach to help make a transition. We're never going to get it perfect on the first try, but that doesn't mean we shouldn't try it. Kids would not grow up that way.

The Chair: Thank you.

We'll hear from Liam O'Neill now, please.

Mr. Liam O'Neill: Hello again, everyone. I'm back.

To start off, the biggest problem with MMP that I see is that if you have top-up seats and someone who gets elected decides they no longer support that party, there is a bit of a conflict of interest. They get elected based on party support, but if they no longer support that party, then what do you do with them? Are they still elected? If they are, then they're not really representing the people who voted for them.

I still believe in proportional representation. I believe STV is the best system. I believe there are two main problems with STV. One is the complexity, but, as we said, that's not a reasonable reason not to use it. With STV, I think the remaining biggest problem is representation in rural areas.

There are two solutions to that. The best solution is to increase the number of MPs in the House so that it's more proportional. Obviously, a lot of people don't like that because it's going to cost more taxpayer money to have more representatives.

The other solution is to keep it at one member in certain places, like the territories and Labrador, and to use the alternative vote system in those smaller places. As much as I don't like that because it's not proportional, it's in a fewer number of places and it can represent people's first choice. If they can't do that, then in my opinion it's not very democratic, certainly not very much a representative democracy.

As well, I want to say that it's a bit frustrating sitting here and hearing such good questions from you and not being able to answer them.

I think we're going to wrap up early. If anyone wants to ask me some of the hard questions they haven't figured out answers to, feel free to, but I realize you probably want a break after such a busy schedule.

Thank you for listening, and good luck.

● (1940)

The Chair: Thank you very much.

We'll listen now to Mr. Norman Whalen, please.

Mr. Norman Whalen (As an Individual): Welcome to Newfoundland, and thanks for bringing the good weather.

Let me first tell you a little about my background. I got addicted to politics when I saw Joe Smallwood speak from the back of a pickup truck when I was about 10 years old.

During my university days in law school, I was an avid NDPer and had the good fortune of working with Tommy Douglas. Had I been old enough in those days, I probably would have run for the NDP.

In 1974, I ran federally for the Liberals, and, in the nineties, my oldest son ran for the Green Party, all in St. John's East. In the last election, my son ran for the Liberals in the same riding.

I have supported the candidates of all the major parties, including the Green Party, financially and with work. I have always tried, absent a national issue, to vote for the best candidate. I think that is a very important thing to do—and I'll get back to that very briefly.

I think it's also important to try to recognize somehow the fact that there are large numbers of people who vote for candidates who don't get elected—and I'll touch on that very briefly inside my two minutes.

I value very strongly the idea that the person you vote for represents the riding, the district, the people who are in that district. That's why people get the chance to vote for the person they want. The preferential ballot helps that happen because it's the vote of at least 50% plus one of the people in the riding. If that system, which I prefer, had been in place, Jack Harris would probably be sitting in Ottawa and not my son. One of them had 45% of the vote and the other had 47% of the vote. However, it is important to note that the other people's votes should have been counted.

There was a system in place before the Harper regime that recognized in some way the votes of individuals, because parties were funded on a percentage of the vote they actually received. At least that helps us get to that representation. We have too short a time to get into it now, but I think there are strong and compelling reasons that a preferential ballot, as opposed to percentage system, is the right way to go. There may be some way to meld the two, but eventually we'll have a Green Party in Ottawa.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Whalen.

We'll say hello to Nick for you, for sure.

Mr. Matt DeCourcey: We said hello to him yesterday in Halifax with his travelling committee.

The Chair: Mr. Roth, please.

● (1945)

Mr. Peter Roth (As an Individual): I don't have too much new to add to the discussion. I just wanted to say that I think it's really unfortunate that right now in Atlantic Canada, despite a very diverse vote, we have 32 Liberal MPs and there is no opposition. No one, as Mr. McCurdy said, can stand in question period and ask the government opposition questions. I think that's really unfortunate.

I think in proportional representation, we'd have that opportunity.

The Chair: Thank you. That was very succinct and to the point, and appreciated, of course.

That wraps up our day in St. John's, which has been a good day.

Ms. Elizabeth May: Can we add a new feature called “questions for Liam”? A two-minute opportunity for Liam to answer the toughest question that any of us have.

The Chair: Maybe we could do it afterward. We don't want to put him under too much pressure here.

Mr. Liam O'Neill: That's no problem with me.

The Chair: Thank you, Liam. I'm sure a couple of us will no doubt want to speak to you after.

Thank you for a great day in St. John's, which, as I said, was because of the quality of the witnesses and of the attendance here this afternoon and tonight.

The meeting is adjourned.