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Chair

Mr. Francis Scarpaleggia

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● (1335)

[*English*]

The Chair (Mr. Francis Scarpaleggia (Lac-Saint-Louis, Lib.)): Welcome to the 38th meeting of the Special Committee on Electoral Reform.

It's a great pleasure to be here in Charlottetown on such a beautiful day and in such a beautiful setting to discuss the issue of electoral reform with individuals who, in a sense, have been paving the way because of their involvement in implementing the idea here in Prince Edward Island. I feel like we're at an industry event where we're exchanging best practices and experiences with our counterparts.

This is a wonderful opportunity for the committee to learn so much from both of you.

The way we proceed is each witness has 10 minutes to present. Then we have one full round of questioning where each member of the committee gets to engage with the witness for about five minutes, and that includes the questions and the answers. If you feel that, because we're over time, you weren't able to fully express your idea, you may of course continue on a thought the next time you have the microphone. There shouldn't be any worries about that or any problems with respect to not getting everything in.

We'll start with the first witness, Mr. Leonard Russell, chair of the Commission on P.E.I.'s Electoral Future. You have 10 minutes, please, sir.

Mr. Leonard Russell (Chair, Commission on P.E.I.'s Electoral Future): Thank you very much.

I need to say first that my wife thanks you for getting me out of the house.

Voices: Oh, oh!

Mr. Leonard Russell: It has been 11 years since I chaired the electoral reform commission. It took some scratching and digging to try to bring forward some memories so that I could sit next to someone who is working on something currently. Let me give you a little background.

The electoral future commission that I chaired filed a report in 2005. The P.E.I. legislature had been lukewarm or hot on the topic of electoral reform for a number of years. In April 2002, there was a report on proportional representation, which was provided to the legislature from the then chief electoral officer of the province. It was a survey document. The legislature at that time got to read about or look at a range of voting alternatives that might be available to them.

In December 2003, as a follow-up to that, the legislature named former chief justice Norman Carruthers to look a little more intensely at the options that had been presented earlier by Mr. Wigginton. He provided another survey report, but he tightened it. In it he recommended to the legislature that they pursue mixed member proportional.

In the fall of 2004, the legislature, on the strength of that report, passed a motion to create the Commission on P.E.I.'s Electoral Future. In January 2005, that commission was put in place. It was an eight-person commission. The legislature attempted to ensure that it was a cross-section of the province, and that political parties were represented.

In the fall of 2005, our group presented its report. Our task was a narrow one. The two prior to us had a broader task; ours was narrow. The legislature had already accepted mixed member proportional. We were asked to devise an educational program that would explain to the public the difference between first past the post and mixed member proportional. We were to prepare an educational package. We were to recommend the wording of a plebiscite question, and we were put on a very tight timeline.

There were posters, pamphlets, radio and TV, and some 20 small groups in addition to a dozen planned meetings that we held across the province to try to ensure that we got out to as many people as possible.

There was some push-back to what we were doing. Obviously, some people thought we were promoting mixed member proportional, and folks had an objection to that, for whatever reason, when, indeed, what we were attempting to do was show that mixed member proportional held up against first past the post, which we kind of assumed most people had a handle on, but maybe they didn't.

Our role, then, was simply to prepare folks for the plebiscite that was to come. We devised a question. The question of the day was: Should Prince Edward Island change to the mixed member proportional system as presented by the Commission on P.E.I.'s Electoral Future? There was a plebiscite on November 28, 2005. There were 32,361 ballots cast, and 63.58% of the good ballots said no.

● (1340)

I might just say that, after 11 years, it would be almost impossible to find a number of copies of each of the things that we used. I do have a final report in both English and French. I have a copy, if needed, of the Norman Carruthers work and the one that came from the chief electoral officer, and so on.

Maybe I'll just stop there.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Mr. Russell, for that history of the issue here in Prince Edward Island.

We'll go now to Mr. Brown for 10 minutes.

Mr. Jordan Brown (Chair, Legislative Assembly of Prince Edward Island, Special Legislative Committee on Democratic Renewal): Thank you very much, and welcome to Charlottetown. We arranged the nice weather just for you, and this room perhaps as well.

Our clerk provided materials which I understand you have, or will have, on your iPads. I have a print copy here. They include the Carruthers report, which I would really commend to you folks. It's like a textbook on electoral reform. It has a lot of the laws that were relevant at that time, which have not changed that much since. It has some history and some background, and different systems that are used throughout the world for consideration. It also has some demographic information relevant to Prince Edward Island, which is perhaps not as useful, but may offer some good context. Our two interim reports are in there. Leonard's report is in there as well.

I hope those will provide you with some context. My speaking notes are there. I'm not going to follow them slavishly because I only have 10 minutes, and there are probably 20 minutes' worth or more of notes there. Leonard has covered some of the material already.

I would add a bit of context to what Leonard said. There is actually a fairly in-depth legal background as to how Prince Edward Island ended up considering democratic renewal. In the early 1990s, as Mr. Russell indicated, a number of different electoral commissions were struck. They had mostly to do with the way we were represented, or the boundaries within which we were represented. At the time, we had dual-member ridings that were based on an old Catholic/Protestant system that went back hundreds of years. There was a review of that taking place.

As a result of some changes stemming from that, in the early 1990s, a gentleman named Donald MacKinnon sued the Government of Prince Edward Island, indicating that he felt he was underrepresented as a resident of what I think was then called Sherwood or Parkdale, which is an urban area. He felt that he had half the representation some of the more rural constituents had as related to the number of people per MLA on a percentage basis. As it turned out, it went through a trial level decision and an appeal. He was successful.

As a result of that, thresholds were then put in place. There was some of that going on across the country at the time. You'll see in former chief justice Carruthers' report that there was some Supreme Court of Canada case law on that kind of thing developing at the time. There is some interesting context that comes out of that.

I'll skip over Mr. Russell's report and take it to the present day. After the 2005 plebiscite, it was widely thought that the appetite hadn't been satisfied in terms of consideration of electoral reform on Prince Edward Island. There were a number of what I will call sore spots with the 2005 plebiscite. Some thought that the option that was there was overly complex. Perhaps there weren't enough polling stations set up for folks to go vote at, and there was only one day to vote. There were some different things like that.

I guess the landscape from that time forward changed fairly significantly too. To give a bit of context on that, in the last seven elections on Prince Edward Island we have had five legislatures in which there has been a fairly big imbalance in terms of government versus opposition. I will not go through them one by one, but we've had two occasions out of those seven where we've had one member oppositions. That's likely a unique thing to Prince Edward Island, at least in a Canadian setting. We've also had three occasions where there have been between three and five opposition members, which creates problems. You can imagine what it would do if there were only one opposition member to serve on a committee or in the legislature, and so on.

That spurred on the conversation that maybe this isn't the ideal way to do things. In addition to that there was what was felt to be a shift of power back and forth between the two main parties of Prince Edward Island, which have effectively been in power since our beginning of time, if you will.

● (1345)

I think, over the course of our history, there have only been five MLAs elected who weren't either a Conservative or a Liberal. In recent memory—I would include research going back a bit—I think you could go back probably 75 years and there would be two: the current leader of the third party, who is on our committee, and an NDP member in the late 1990s.

In the last election, both the NDP and the Green Party had around 10% of popular support. All four parties vying in the election made campaign promises to deal with some kind of electoral reform. Out of that, in the spring of 2015 after we were elected, the premier presented a white paper on democratic renewal in the legislature, essentially outlining the issues and starting the discourse in relation to them. He committed to move forward with a plebiscite on democratic renewal sometime within very short order after that.

Our committee was struck before the end of that sitting. We're a four member committee now because one of our members has recently resigned, but we started out as a five member committee and did our work that way. There are two government members on the committee: me and the Honourable Paula Biggar. Previously, there was also Janice Sherry. There is also the leader of the third party, Peter Bevan-Baker, and there is Sidney MacEwen. We represent all three parties that are represented in the legislature.

Our mandate was to guide engagement stemming from the white paper on democratic renewal. From there, we got our feet under ourselves and learned a bit about the different systems that might be possible and the kinds of things we should be looking at.

We set out to do a public engagement process through the fall of 2015. We went to as many different communities across Prince Edward Island as we could and seeking input from Islanders as to the kinds of things we should be looking at. What we heard out of that was that there are certain principles we should be trying to glean from the presentations that were made to us.

We had presentations in relation to a number of different systems, the different attributes of the electoral systems we should be looking at, and different things we should consider relative to different kinds of systems.

We came back after our fall consultations and put together an interim report which effectively recommended that we narrow our consideration to four different new options, in addition to our current first-past-the-post system.

We undertook that consideration throughout the course of the winter, in meetings that looked a bit like this one actually, except that members of the public were invited to interact with committee members. Basically, a microphone was passed around to seek input on the different systems and to engage in a discourse back and forth, so it was very informal.

The idea was to narrow down the options that we had for consideration and to try to figure out what a plebiscite ballot would look like. There was a lot of consideration that went into the plebiscite ballot structure over the course of that time. To bring it to a conclusion in that regard, we chose the structure that we have because we thought it would ensure the greatest level of engagement in the process. In other words, it would encourage people to go beyond picking their favourite by essentially tipping voters off to the fact that their favourite might not be picked first and that they might want to have a say in the overall choice through a second, third, fourth, or fifth choice.

We advanced a further interim report in the spring of last year, recommending that a plebiscite take place starting on October 29 and that electronic voting be conducted. Essentially, that means you can vote pretty well any way you can conceive of, including from home at 2 a.m., in your underwear, sitting in front of your computer. Effectively, the idea is to make it as easy as possible to select your choice and to vote. The period is open for 10 days. You can vote by phone. You can vote in person. You can mail in a ballot. You can vote on your computer. You can vote however you wish, and 16- and 17-year-olds will be able to vote in our plebiscite.

● (1350)

There's obviously a lot more that went into it than that, but in 10 minutes, those are the high-level notes of the process that we've undertaken over the past year and a little bit.

The Chair: Thank you very much. That was quite fascinating.

Now we have an opportunity to delve into your testimonies in greater depth, beginning with Mr. Aldag, for five minutes.

Mr. John Aldag (Cloverdale—Langley City, Lib.): Thanks to both of our witnesses for being here today. It is a fantastic day to be in your lovely city and province.

We'd like to also thank members of the audience for coming out to be part of this today. Hopefully, you'll be around to give us your opinions and thoughts on this important topic as we work through the afternoon.

As the chair said in his opening comments, it's really exciting for me and our committee to be here to talk, based on the many years of discussions we've had in this province about electoral reform.

Our committee has spent a fair bit of time on the question of referendum. It has come up more than once and sometimes many times in a day.

I want to go to the education piece. I was reading some of the background materials over the last couple of days. What I didn't see was anything about the education that was done leading up to the referendum, or plebiscite in this case, and what the parameters are around that.

Maybe, Mr. Russell, I could start with you, and then I'll move to Mr. Brown. My question is on the current plebiscite about who's doing the education piece and what the costs are and what parameters there are around other parties getting involved in it. We've heard comments that on complex issues like this, the main message can get lost and you end up voting on other issues. You've had experience. I'd like to know how you're dealing with that whole issue of the plebiscites and the education leading up to it.

Mr. Russell, based on your recollections of what happened back in 2005, could you take us through a bit of the public awareness and education piece?

Mr. Leonard Russell: The members of our commission spent their in-house time trying to develop some approaches that ensured information was provided to the general public. It ranged from trying to get a TV spot during the hockey game on a Saturday night, to ensuring that there were materials delivered to every mailbox in the province.

I apologize. I don't have copies of those kinds of things, but we had pamphlets of this nature. One was how our list candidate was selected. If people wanted to find out how that fit in, there was a brochure on that.

There was another one on the characteristics of first past the post and mixed member proportional.

The proposed mixed member proportional model describes the electoral future in Prince Edward Island based on what we were talking about, so it talked about women and politics, and then there were some answers.

● (1355)

Mr. John Aldag: Is it your commission, exclusively, that did the promotion, the educational piece or—

Mr. Leonard Russell: We engaged a public relations firm to help us with the design of some of the materials.

Mr. John Aldag: Do you recall the government of the day or any of the other parties or advocacy groups for one system or another getting involved as well?

Mr. Leonard Russell: Yes, there certainly were “yes” groups and “no” groups who were on their own, putting information forward to the general public and to our commission as well.

Mr. John Aldag: Do you remember whether there were any spending limits or constraints, or was it simply anybody who had a budget could engage in the conversation?

Mr. Leonard Russell: Do you mean the spending limits of other people?

Mr. John Aldag: For any of the organizations, for the plebiscite, was it just anybody who wanted to engage—

Mr. Leonard Russell: There were no limits put on it, except the limit that was put on us by a reasonably small budget. We came close to staying within it.

Mr. John Aldag: With that, I'll move to Mr. Brown to bring us to what's happening in the current one and how it's being structured for the education piece. Are there any parameters put around other organizations participating, or is it that anybody can join in with whatever resources they have?

Mr. Jordan Brown: There are no parameters. Anybody can join in. I understand you're hearing from the head of the PR action team later today. I'm not sure that's part of what she's presenting. Perhaps she could give you some more insight from that side of things.

Mr. Russell presented to us and talked about some of the issues they encountered going through. We made the decision early on that this was something that was going to be a key piece of whatever we ultimately decided to do. As much for reasons of impartiality as anything else, or an appearance of that, we decided to task Elections Prince Edward Island with that job. They, in more recent elections, have taken on that kind of role in any event. It was something that I think they were somewhat keen to do.

They've engaged a PR person and a number of different, what I'm going to call, senior political science students who have been actively involved in their communities in both languages. They have a four fold pamphlet that's going out this week. They have radio spots, which you might hear while you're here. There's a lot of social media activity going on.

Members of that team are going out presenting to numerous groups every day around the province. They've developed an education package to take into the schools, and they do presentations at the schools. With 16- and 17-year-olds voting, that was a key piece of our education platform, and it's really a key piece of our engagement platform. We figured we would get them while they are in school and young, and hopefully they will keep voting after they vote in this plebiscite.

Basically, the idea is that you need to start a conversation in the communities and to foster that conversation.

The Chair: Thank you. We're up to seven minutes now. That's good, we're getting good information.

We'll go to Mr. Reid.

Mr. Scott Reid (Lanark—Frontenac—Kingston, CPC): Thank you very much. Those were good answers. It was well worth waiting for them to come out. I appreciate the flexibility you showed, Mr. Chair. I'm hoping you may show it again.

The Chair: It'll depend on the quality of the questions, but in your case they're always good questions, so I think you can count on it.

Mr. Scott Reid: Thank you.

I want to ask a question. I'll start with you, Mr. Russell, because you administered the first process the province went through.

In that plebiscite, there was less than a 40% turnout, as you know, and only 36% of those who did participate voted yes. This raises a number of turnout-related questions I'd like to pose to you.

Let's say for the sake of argument that you had the same less than 40% turnout, but you had a majority of.... I think you had a 60% cap at that time. Let's say you had 60% plus one, but a 35% turnout. Would you have regarded that as a legitimate mandate for change?

● (1400)

Mr. Leonard Russell: When those questions were raised around our commission table, we always came back to answering them with what would happen if this were a provincial election. It's voting day. People have the opportunity to come out and vote. The numbers that show up are the numbers that show up. How does it cut itself?

We recommended, if you read the report, to government that it become a 50% plus one for the same reason. That's the way all other government-related and public-related decisions were made.

Yes, my answer would be if it met those terms, then it would be fine with me.

Mr. Scott Reid: All right.

I agree with you about 50% plus one as opposed to 60%, by the way. I think in British Columbia, when they achieved 57%, it created a legitimacy issue. They were therefore forced to have a second referendum shortly afterwards, because clearly a majority had actually supported the change.

To some degree that was kind of a trick question. The reason I asked it was to make the point that if you have low turnout and people vote no, that is also a legitimate mandate. It is not, in my view, an excuse to say that the people were wrong, that they should have known better, that we don't need to have, or indeed we don't want to have, public consultation, because they might not participate in the numbers we want, or they might vote the way we don't want. That to me is profoundly anti-democratic.

At a practical level, dealing with the education component, it sounds as though you've gone to considerable effort, Mr. Brown, to try to have more public education this time around than last time. Of course a number of things have changed, with access to electronic media and so on.

This question is for both of you. Do you think part of the reason for a lower yes vote in the last plebiscite was a lack of public awareness, education, and understanding of how the systems work? Do you think that is being overcome, or if you don't think it is, do you think it can be overcome as a practical matter?

I don't know who should start with that, but I'll throw it out to both of you.

Mr. Leonard Russell: If I may, I'd like to answer that first.

Mr. Brown has already alluded to a number of the obstacles that perhaps seemed to be in place during the time of the 2005 plebiscite. We were....

This is the first time I'll say publicly what I said into my coffee cup a number of times in 2005.

Voices: Oh, oh!

Mr. Leonard Russell: A polling station issue occurred with that plebiscite in that the number of polling stations in the province were dramatically reduced. Folks no longer went to where they thought they were going. It did create some frustration. The other thing that surfaced partway through our educational program was that I think both of the mainline parties in the province realized, for the first time, the ramifications of mixed member proportional.

It was an unspoken issue around our commission table. There were reasons for that. We had party people sitting at the table, nominated by the two main parties. We just didn't talk about that. But again, away from the official spot, several people would talk about what they knew.

The thing that happened was that as the parties realized that it could be possible under mixed member proportional for those who might have the majority under the first-past-the-post portion to indeed not have a majority standing when the....

What's the word I'm looking for? I have a mind block.

A voice: Minority government?

Mr. Leonard Russell: Well, it could result in a minority situation. If the list people were just cut out of it altogether, then they might indeed have a majority standing.

We began to get undermined by the very folks who put us in place. I don't quite know how to back that up, but I do know it was discussed within parish situations, church situations. Parties collectively were advising the general public about the pitfalls of looking at mixed member proportional.

My own view was that the parties of the day realized that the power they could hold under first past the post might not exist under mixed member proportional, but they indeed had asked that mixed member proportional be pursued.

● (1405)

So that's limited, in my view, the number of people who might have voted yes or no, and the number who turned out.

The Chair: Thank you.

We're well over seven minutes, but maybe somebody else can follow up on that when they get a chance.

Mr. Jordan Brown: If I could just tell you quickly, too, we did address that in our second report. If you want to look for it, it's in there.

The Chair: Okay, thanks.

Mr. Cullen.

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

I wouldn't mind the reference page so we can focus in on your second report.

Mr. Leonard Russell: I'm trying to look for it.

Mr. Nathan Cullen: Maybe later. It doesn't have to be now.

Well, Mr. Russell, you just said something incredibly important.

Mr. Leonard Russell: I might not make it out of the hall.

Mr. Nathan Cullen: I think you'll make it out of the hall just fine.

We came across from Newfoundland today, and as I was coming in, I was wondering why P.E.I. has been so good at trying to get at this question. Why is it a question here as opposed to not being a big question in Saskatchewan or not being a big question in Newfoundland, just in terms of history? Then I looked through the last, say, five provincial results, and I can see why. Under the results, there have been many occasions when a party got 58% of the vote, but got 96% of the seats. A party got 52% of the votes and then that translated into 85% of the seats. Then in the last election, as you say, the Greens and the NDP came together for about 22% of the vote, and had zero seats.

The will of the voter not being reflected into the House of Commons, is it a strong motivation for the conversation here in Prince Edward Island? I ask you that question more neutrally.

But it's based on people seeing the results that they're seeing.

Mr. Leonard Russell: In the latter part of what we did in 2005, our commission could see that some traction was being gained at least in terms of the interests. It may not have shown up at the polling station, and I think there are a couple of reasons why perhaps that didn't occur.

Mr. Nathan Cullen: Let's get into those reasons, because not having the same polling stations—voter habits are what they are—people not going down to the church or the high school they've always voted at, not having as many, having one voting day, etc., are all barriers that we know can distort a vote.

You said you began to get undermined by the very folks who put you in place. It seems that the challenge for politicians in this is the theory versus the practice, I suppose, of electoral reform. In theory, it's hard to look through the results both here provincially and nationally and see that distortion. Voters said this and that was sometimes unrecognizable in the results. In the last two elections federally, we've had 39% of the vote for each of the governing parties who won office, yet they end up with 100% of the power in the House, and 60% or more of voters are sitting there wondering how that works. It seems that it's not difficult to undermine this process. It's almost like you're talking about an elephant in the room.

Mr. Leonard Russell: Exactly.

Mr. Nathan Cullen: As soon as people started to do some math, they went, “Hey, wait a second, this might lead to minority parliaments, might lead to sharing power.” I think sharing power philosophically is not a bad thing, and in Canada's history, it has led to some great policies, such as the social safety net and the flag.

How do we overcome this federally? I'm sure 60-odd per cent of those voted into this Parliament came in with a mandate to change the electoral system. We have a black and white promise from the Prime Minister that that was the last election under first past the post, yet one senses the enthusiasm from the Prime Minister's Office has waned somewhat. We're not getting the kind of energy.... It took us eight months to even get a committee together. It doesn't show urgency. How do we overcome that?

● (1410)

Mr. Leonard Russell: I don't have an answer for that, but I think when you're in the position, as you folks are, of now trying to take a fresh look at what could happen or should happen nationally, I think the elephants that are in the room should be given sandwiches and tea—you're in Prince Edward Island—and then make sure everybody understands what they are.

Now we didn't address it at our table—

Mr. Nathan Cullen: Sorry, I'm missing you a bit, but you mean name it, essentially, put it out on the table.

Mr. Leonard Russell: That's right. We didn't put it on the table, but it needs to be put on the table.

Mr. Nathan Cullen: That this has consequences.... It has consequences for people who are in office now.

Mr. Leonard Russell: Exactly.

Mr. Nathan Cullen: Their seat might change. They may, in fact, not get elected again. If the system that worked for you to get you into power is going to be changed, and maybe power won't be acquired in the same way, that has to be named.

Mr. Leonard Russell: Power is the issue.

Mr. Nathan Cullen: Power is the issue.

Mr. Leonard Russell: If I were doing it again—if I were now starting this over again—and it came to my attention that this was going on, I would be talking about it publicly.

Mr. Nathan Cullen: That issue....

Mr. Leonard Russell: That issue...because it would need to be drawn to the attention of the folks who are kind of getting information under the table, rather than through the public consultation that we are having. If that's what they are going to base their decision on, then they need to know that the group that's going to write the report indeed is aware that this is happening.

Mr. Nathan Cullen: That a process can be undermined....

I'm curious about education. Folks say that we should have a referendum, and we'll just educate people on all the systems. I'm sure Mr. Brown can comment on this. We have systems that are incredibly complicated. Some people have said.... A fellow last night in Newfoundland said, “I have a Ph.D., and I find this very difficult to understand fully.” It's easy to undermine the education process in a referendum. We saw that in the U.K. recently.

It's easier to lie than it is to explain the truth, in a referendum scenario, about something that's complicated, and voting systems are complicated.

How do we get over that, Mr. Brown? Do we have any evidence as to whether the education worked last time around? Were people aware of what it was they were voting on and what the implications were?

Mr. Jordan Brown: We looked at this in a fairly in-depth way when we started out, and we actually had Mr. Russell in to talk to us at that point in time. It is a very valid.... It's something we spent a lot of our time trying to figure out. I think, to his point, that we at least tried to give the elephants in the room their tea and crumpets, and carry on. There is a question of political will, and there is a question of confidence in your system. If the system is the right system that people want, there shouldn't be any issue in having a discussion about it, and if it's not the right system, you don't have any business trying to defend it either.

That's kind of the position we started out from, and we didn't presume to know the answers. We wanted to consult first and find out what people thought, and then really put people's thoughts back to them and say, “Here is, in a broad way, what we've heard from you. We distilled it into principles, and each of the systems you see there is really tied to a principle.”

To your question about the ability to undermine things and the difficulty in understanding it, it can get very complex. I would argue that things were more complex last time, with one new system on the ballot, because they got so far down into the weeds than they are this time, with four new systems on the ballot, because it's higher level, and the systems are there based upon principles. The discussion is more about—

The Chair: Interesting, that's a very good point.

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

Ms. Elizabeth May (Saanich—Gulf Islands, GP): I have to say what a pleasure it is to be back in Prince Edward Island, being a maritimer myself, but especially to have this panel here. This is extraordinarily good timing for us. I hope our presence in the province doesn't in any way interfere with the decision that Prince Edward Islanders have in front of them.

Of course, it may have been implicit in your remarks, Mr. Brown, but I hope you won't mind my expressing my enormous pride in the fact that the one current MLA who isn't a Conservative or a Liberal is the leader of the Prince Edward Island Green Party, Peter Bevan-Baker. He is someone I admire enormously.

I want to go to you, Mr. Russell, because, number one, I can't begin to imagine why your wife would want you out of the house—

Voices: Oh, oh!

Ms. Elizabeth May: —but I'm grateful for your candour. The idea that we're going to name the elephants in the room and give them sandwiches and tea has to be the very nicest way I've ever heard anyone put the notion of dealing with problems of human nature and the human nature of people in politics.

As a British Columbian now, I know that the referenda in British Columbia were substantially undermined because both of the major parties—it's sad to say, Nathan—the B.C. NDP and the B.C. Liberals did not want the referendum to pass to bring proportional representation to British Columbia. My colleagues in the New Zealand Green Party say the reason they had so many referenda in New Zealand was that subsequent and successive governments wanted to do everything they could to avoid their election commitments to bring in proportional representation.

This is going to take an act of political courage that we've not seen from people in politics at provincial levels in Canada. I have to say probably the folks in Ontario would say the same of the MMP resolution, that there wasn't strong support from governments for the Ontario Citizens' Assembly's recommendations for mixed member proportional.

I'd be grateful for any further advice, in addition to sandwiches and tea, for how 12 members of Parliament—and I have to say this, the people around this table are great people, and we wear five different political hats. Our friends from the Bloc aren't with us today, but they're great too. How do we find the political courage to do what's right for the country and for the voters and set aside the fact that at the last minute we may experience political pressure that we ought to duck and not deliver on the promise that 2015 will be the last election held under first past the post?

I was hoping Mr. Russell might have some sandwiches and tea advice.

● (1415)

Mr. Leonard Russell: I'll have to live that down. I hope somebody can give you sandwiches and tea before your day is up.

I think that in the list of options that are put forward for public consideration, the consideration of the voting public, there has to be that clear, unadulterated option that gives clear proportionality to the standing after the election is done. I don't think we should provide options that have a moving vote because that simply clouds the issue again, and it sort of permits a power situation to emerge rather than a good proportional situation to emerge.

If the public rejects that, that's fine, but I think the way that you will get to what the public really wants is to be sure that there is that clear option on the list that would give proportional standing.

Ms. Elizabeth May: Mr. Brown, do you have any recommendations for us? You are, as our chair indicated at the opening, in exactly the same position as he was in, but you're in the P.E.I. context. We are following in your footsteps, so to speak. What advice would you give us as a committee to come to a consensus recommendation to deliver on December 1?

Mr. Jordan Brown: Obviously, it's tough for me to give advice in your context, but I can tell you what we did. The big thing that I think we did was—and I think we did it well, and I'm not saying that we were perfect by any means—early on we turned our minds to the process and to what would likely be, I'm going to say, at least palatable to the people. We listened when they had suggestions as to how we make changes to that so that it would be more palatable to them. Any perceived issues.... I know you guys had an issue right off with the composition of your committee. We had similar issues, but I think we moved very quickly as a committee and, I will say, worked tremendously well together to dispel those issues by building up public trust and by following our process and giving credence to what we heard.

I think that's all you can do. Set your process; stick to your process, and you have to have faith in the process. Once people have faith in that process, and they realize that it's a credible process, you're on your way, and there's less room to doubt. It's never going to be perfect, though. That's the downside to it.

● (1420)

Ms. Elizabeth May: Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. May.

Ms. Romanado, go ahead, please.

Mrs. Sherry Romanado (Longueuil—Charles-LeMoyne, Lib.): I'd like to thank both of you for being here today.

To the members of the audience, thank you so much. It's a beautiful sunny day and you're inside with us, but we do have a nice view, so this is good.

Mr. Brown, you've decided to include those who are 16 and 17 in this referendum and you've also decided to open it up to include Internet voting, and voting by phone, in person, or by mail. Also, the dates are a little longer. Could you tell me the rationale for this? I'm assuming I know what it is, but I'd like to hear it from you.

Mr. Jordan Brown: It's really a simple rationale. It's all about engagement. I could say that and leave it, but I'll add a little context.

The e-voting piece is really in response to, as Mr. Russell indicated, the issues that we had in 2005. It's a far cheaper way to conduct a plebiscite. It's a much more engaging way to do it, which is really to say the issues are not as simple as deciding candidate X or candidate Y. You can sit home in front of your computer and take half an hour to read about them and compare one to the other and do some research and make your decision at the end of your research. We felt that was a crucial piece to the e-voting component of it.

The time frame is expansive enough that there should really be no excuse. It's over 10 days. If people are away, they might be away for a week, but they're probably not going to be away for 10 days. There are all kinds of different reasons for having an extended time frame, but you can do that if you don't have to pay to have a bum in a seat in a poll for 10 days straight.

As far as the 16- and 17-year-olds go, they will vote in the next election. They're in school right now and the hope is—and I think this is kind of paying off—that they will be engaged in a setting where, effectively, there's some structure to how they learn about politics and democracy and they're able to participate in it. Hopefully they'll go home and educate their siblings and parents and grandparents and all the rest of it about the process, and carry that forward through their life in a good, structured, educated way.

Mrs. Sherry Romanado: With regard to e-voting, we've heard a lot of testimony about the security breaches that can happen. We saw it in the United States with the Democratic National Convention and we've seen it in other countries, as examples. How can you make sure that, whatever it is, the security of the vote is there and that there's no coercion, or that if someone's sitting at home in their underwear voting, somebody's not standing over them saying, “That's the person you need to vote for”, or, “That's the yes versus the no”?

Mr. Jordan Brown: I guess I would flip it on its head and ask whether you can really ensure that in any way, no matter what system you're utilizing. Elections P.E.I. did the research into this and came and made their formal presentations regarding how it can be carried out. My understanding is that although there is some relatively small level of potential for that kind of interference, overall it's not a statistically significant piece of it. Knowing that, I think, we felt that we had the assurance we needed to recommend it on the basis that the pros far outweigh the cons. Much like the systems that are there to be voted on, there's no perfect answer to this, but sometimes you have to put the good side of things ahead of the potential pitfalls and kind of have faith in it working out.

Mrs. Sherry Romanado: I'm going to ask you the million dollar question: Why are you doing it again? In 2005, 36% of people said they didn't want it. That's not a really high number. I'd say if it had been 45%, or close to 50%, I'd say okay, maybe there's still some groundswell there, still some interest, but 10 years later, why again? Is it just based on a campaign promise? Do you have statistical data to support that people overwhelmingly wanted this? I'm just curious as to why you're going through the exercise again.

● (1425)

Mr. Jordan Brown: I think I already answered that, but I'll say it again. I think it's all about confidence in your democratic system. I will say that there were certainly enough questions about our system that it warranted having the conversation. In any democracy, we can assume that we know the answers, but it's often good to actually go out to the public and find out what they think about it. There are all kinds of different ways of doing that, but this was ultimately the way that was chosen here, and I think there's validity to that.

Mrs. Sherry Romanado: Would you recommend that we do the same thing, that we go back to Canadians through a referendum and ask them?

Mr. Jordan Brown: There are a number of different ways in which I can answer that question, but I'll say this. We all know that the Prime Minister has been on record as saying that's the last time we'll vote under that existing system. If you truly want change, I will tell you that it would be much easier to effect change without going through a plebiscite, in other words, if you can come to a consensus.

Everybody might want change, but if there are 20 people in the room, they'll probably want 20 different kinds of change. It's hard to come to the one that everybody agrees on. If you want to have a conversation about whether or not you want change and what that might look like, and try to arrive at a consensus after that, a plebiscite is the way to do it. If you want change, the easier way to do it is probably not to have a plebiscite. If you already know the kind of change you want, or have an idea generally, there's a question there of really what the easiest path to it is.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

We'll go to Mr. Richards now.

Mr. Blake Richards (Banff—Airdrie, CPC): I want to ask you about a referendum as well, because you've obviously made the decision to give the final say, the ultimate say, to the people in the process you've undertaken. That followed the precedent we saw here in 2005, but also in other provinces that have gone this route.

I wonder if you could tell us why you chose that. Why did you feel it was important to give people the say on the final decision? Once you've come up with a recommendation, you've given them that opportunity. Why did you feel that was important?

Mr. Jordan Brown: I might first be very careful to say that it wasn't our recommendation or decision to proceed in that way or that direction. It was two things. It was a motion of the legislature, but ultimately it was basically something that stemmed from the white paper and the discussion that ensued in the legislature.

Starting from that point, the context that I think I could probably safely add, as could anybody in the public who witnessed that unfolding, is that our legislators didn't presume to know what the outcome might be of that kind of a consideration. As much as deciding that we wanted to have the conversation, and the importance of that, I think there was a corollary: we had decidedly not decided that we knew the answer to the question.

That's basically the path we took to get there. It's a bit of a different path from running through an election with a mandate to proceed in a set direction.

● (1430)

Mr. Blake Richards: I guess if you presume that this is what happened.... I think in this case a number of potential options were laid out. There would be discussion on them, but without, as you said, a final solution in mind, although some people have alluded that they think there was a solution the Liberals had in mind. Having the committee come forward with a consensus, as you've suggested should be done, would be important, but if that's not able to be arrived at here, then obviously going to the people would be the option.

I don't think it was clear to anyone what exactly the outcome would be. It was saying that 2015 would be the last election under a certain system but giving no indication as to what the system would be. That's obviously something that would be important to voters as well.

I want to turn the floor over to my colleague Mr. Reid. He has a couple of questions that he has a burning desire to ask. I'm in a generous mood, so I'll let him have that opportunity.

Mr. Scott Reid: Thank you, Blake. Your cheque's in the mail.

I just want to say that Mr. Brown very thoughtfully sent a note over indicating that page 18 of the April 2016 report deals with the issue of voter participation levels. Rather than read it into the record, could I just ask members if we can accept what they said as testimony that's being submitted to us? Would that be okay?

Okay, all right.

I want to ask about something else, Mr. Brown. You dealt in the same report on pages 11 and 12 with the question of how to structure the questions in the referendum. You give a very thoughtful analysis of the five different ways you could have asked the question. Then you explain, having made the decision of a multi-option, referendum how to structure it.

Why did you choose a multiple option referendum as opposed to a single versus the status quo referendum from 2005? I keep saying referendum. I know plebiscite is the term you're using, I apologize.

Also, the way that you've structured it, it's a simple preferential ballot as opposed to a two question ballot, as has been done, for example, in New Zealand. What is the rationale for those two decisions?

Mr. Jordan Brown: I'll start by saying that I'd need a lot more than five minutes to explain the rationale behind that. It took us three or four meetings, times about three hours each, to get to that conclusion.

However, the rationale behind the structure that we ended up with was that we thought that would be the most engaging ballot structure that we could arrive at. If you look back to our mandate, it was to engage discussion out of the white paper, so that's the primary.... It pits our current option on equal footing against four different options. The four different options were related to principles that we had heard about. You start out with a handful of principles that would hopefully represent the different optimal desires that we had heard from the public throughout the course of the fall and then refined it over the winter, and they're each given equal opportunity. Regarding the ranking part of it, if your first is not number one, then you get to have a say in the second, third, fourth, and so on.

That was thought to be better, but I will say that there's no perfect answer to this. You could have a two-part ballot, which might ask: Do you want change, yes or no? Then you would rank your possible favourites for change. The problem with that kind of a ballot structure is that if you don't want change or if you're okay with the system, it's way easier to just say that you don't want change or to not vote at all and never have to consider the other four options. Then in a ballot where all five of them are there on equal footing and you know that one is only a little different from the next one.... The systems that are there are on a spectrum and that's on purpose. If you want a little bit of change, well there are options for a little bit of change. If you want quite a bit more change, there are options for quite a bit more change and you have the opportunity to rank on your order of preference one to the next.

Mr. Scott Reid: It sounds like you're trying to eliminate the phenomenon in which someone walks in, simply votes no to any change in the first part of the ballot and then doesn't bother filling out the second one at all. Is that what you're saying?

Mr. Jordan Brown: That's basically correct, yes. The other thing that is coming out of the 2005 plebiscite, is there's basically an information vacuum resulting from that. We knew that people didn't want that kind of change, but we didn't know whether they didn't want any change or what the real results of that plebiscite were because there were only two options.

● (1435)

The Chair: Okay, thank you.

We'll go to Mr. DeCourcey, please.

Mr. Matt DeCourcey (Fredericton, Lib.): I can see the rationale in allowing someone who doesn't want change to then at least have a choice, if the public is voting for change, to have a say in what form of change is most palatable for them.

Let me say it's great to be back in P.E.I., not golfing, horse racing, or playing soccer, but doing something much more interesting and meaningful. Jordan and Leonard, thanks so much for being here today and for everyone else who is joining us as well.

Jordan, when I was listening to you, you talked about the difference between the process of putting forth a particular option detail versus the status quo and the second option being to provide some high-level, value-laden options for people to choose from. Put the whole question of referendum aside for us, and I'm still seeing the parallels between those two options and the options that we have in delivering a report. The report is a specific recommendation to government versus some areas of common values that we can deliver to government, where there might be an opportunity to find some consensus.

What sort of advice would you have for us, if that's the process we have to undertake? Yes, a referendum will be part of the equation or part of the question, but even then are we providing high-level, value-laden recommendations to government or do you think we need to find a specific system and deliver that in a recommendation?

Mr. Jordan Brown: The reality is that—in my understanding, anyway; I don't presume to know too much—at the end of the day, people have entrusted you to come back to them with their presentations consolidated into something concrete that they can make a decision on. We heard this in presentations to us throughout. I guess the answer to the question is that you have to look at your mandate. I don't presume to know what your mandate is. If it is to come back and give advice in terms of principles, then that's probably what you ought to do, but if it is to come back with a system for consideration, then that's what you ought to do.

What is important, based on what we heard, is that whatever systems you have or have developed, or have been presented to you that you've managed to ball up into a neat package, be related back, at least the general principles that you heard or something that people can effectively get behind. We heard a number of different times that it can't be just something you made up: “Here, this is great. This ought to work.”

In a roundabout way, that's all to say if it is logical and generally something that people have presented as being workable, I think people will respect that, and that's what they would expect as well. Basically, it has to be transparent, and it has to something that people can get behind. If you have accomplished that, and you feel that you have a consensus or a mandate, that's what you need to be looking for.

I don't think it would really be appropriate for me to dictate to you that it should be principles or that it should be a particular system. You really need to hear that from the people themselves. I could give you my own personal views, but that's all they would be.

That's the best I can offer you on that one.

Mr. Matt DeCourcey: Our mandate is to deliver a report to Parliament at the beginning of December. To my understanding, the government cabinet will deliver its proposed legislation in the spring.

Given that, Mr. Russell, and the fact that we've gone across the country and have heard diverse views from Canadians, still the challenge is, how do we reach out to the millions who have not, unfortunately, been able to be a part of this process and ensure that their voice is heard and that they have some insight into the process?

Do you have any lessons from your experience here in P.E.I. that we can be mindful of in our final deliberations over the next two months?

Mr. Leonard Russell: Again, in our situation, we were mandated to bring back a suggested wording for a plebiscite question. Having said that, our committee felt strongly that, unlike what Jordan and his group are doing, it would not be valuable to anyone to try to present something that had several parts to it, whatever it was.

If I can get to your question directly—and if I can be forgiven for just being sent here for the afternoon by my wife—I would say that, for a group of this size that is travelling the country to find the best thinking—if I can excuse myself from that—on the topic at hand, surely it wouldn't be out of place to suggest a question on a particular approach.

If mixed member proportional is the way your committee thinks, on the strength of everything you've heard, then as a taxpayer, I would expect you to make that recommendation, and not have it somehow get caught up in the conglomerate that exists beyond you, to now try to figure out whether that is one of the options or not. Don't challenge me. Not having heard everything, I have to trust you anyway, so don't challenge me with four or five options that I don't know a whole lot about.

I'll trust the committee to do that. I hope you will trust yourselves to do that. I don't know if those who exist beyond you in the House of Commons have that level of trust or not.

You said you wouldn't give a personal opinion, but I'm giving mine.

● (1440)

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. MacGregor.

Mr. Alistair MacGregor (Cowichan—Malahat—Langford, NDP): Mr. Russell, I'll start with you. I just want to go back to exploring elephants in rooms, and so on. You know very well that in the debate in the House of Commons leading up to the formation of this committee, a lot of the debate centred on the fact that the original committee was going to have 10 people: six Liberals, three Conservatives, and one NDP. The committee was going to be looking at reforming our electoral system based on the electoral system we all seemed to be criticizing at the time, with parties with vested interests, and so on.

It's really been fantastic testimony today. With all of your experience in this process, what's your opinion on how the present system is proceeding? Keeping in mind vested interests, if the present government gets a clear message from the people of Prince Edward Island, do you have faith that it is going to act on it, when it is in power because of the current system?

Mr. Leonard Russell: I wish Jordan and I were meeting with you on separate days, because my comment is going to run over some toes or something.

If the government, however committed, is given too many options to choose from, I think the chances of it being addressed in the manner everybody thought it would be are slimmer than if you took one option to them for consideration. Bear with me on that.

There's already been a commitment made in this province that the issue will be looked at. If the issue is looked at by Mr. Brown's committee, and a recommendation goes forward, it will be tougher for the government not to do something very constructive in the direction being recommended than it would be if it had four or five incremental types of recommendations.

I am fearful of any government, your own included, that would see a small though seemingly significant change made to the electoral system that in the end would not allow proportional representation in the House, given the concern that now seems to be all around us, either provincially or nationally. If in the end it didn't allow that to happen, then if I were on your committee, I would ask what all this has been about.

Surely the people who put your committee in place, as with Mr. Brown's committee, understand that you do your legwork, you bring in your recommendation, and then it's time for something to happen. I think it will, if the choices aren't too great, when it gets to that level.

● (1445)

Mr. Alistair MacGregor: I'm a rookie member of Parliament. One thing you learn quickly about this job is that it's very much a balance between being a trustee and being a delegate. Sometimes it's somewhere in the middle. On some very important questions, like Bill C-14, I consulted very widely with my constituents for their opinions, but for the day-to-day stuff, I think the electors who sent me to Ottawa trust my ability as a member of Parliament to make the right decisions, and I will be held accountable in 2019 for those decisions.

I want this committee to make a firm recommendation. Otherwise, what's the point? We've spent a lot of money. We've spent a lot of time on the road. I appreciate the fact that you've echoed that.

If this committee, by consensus, because it is based proportionally on the votes we received in the election and not on our seats, gives a clear recommendation, do you think the government should proceed with legislation next year instead of going to the people? What's your opinion on that?

Mr. Leonard Russell: You mean instead of going back to the people again.

Mr. Alistair MacGregor: Yes.

Mr. Leonard Russell: I think the House should ensure that the legislation is put in place and should go with it.

Mr. Chairman, I wasn't invited here to give my personal opinion, was I?

The Chair: Oh, absolutely you were.

Mr. Nathan Cullen: It's too late now.

A voice: [*Inaudible—Editor*]

Voices: Oh, oh!

Mr. Leonard Russell: I remember once being offended by that comment. I was 15 at the time.

One of the things that kills well-intended statements, beliefs, and intents is that it's fuzzy when it comes down to the point of the big group making the decision. That would be the same whether it was a committee of a Lions Club or a chamber of commerce or whatever it was. If it's still too fuzzy when it gets down to the level of the big organization to make the decision, then the chances of breaking from tradition and making that decisive step into the unknown, so to speak, are greatly reduced, I think.

I know you don't have this information, but I spent 35 years serving the public. It wasn't at this level, but I had to answer to irate parents of schoolchildren. I worked a bit at the level of government on a secondment basis. I know the difference between being in the public and trying to do something and working with government and trying to get something done. I've learned on both sides that if you're going to do the work, make it concise and clear. Put it on the plate, move it across, and say, "Okay, we have a consensus. We've agreed on this. We certainly appreciate the fact that we were tasked with doing it."

The Chair: Thank you.

We'll go to Mr. Rayes.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Alain Rayes (Richmond—Arthabaska, CPC): My question is for Mr. Brown.

Do you think the process implemented in Prince Edward Island was good and legitimate?

[*English*]

Mr. Jordan Brown: I'll answer in English, if that's all right.

Mr. Alain Rayes: Yes.

Mr. Jordan Brown: The process that came together in the end was ultimately a process that we put together as a committee. In other words, it was the part that we had something to do with, the consultation part. I think the process overall leading into that, which was envisioned, I guess, by executive government, was also a legitimate and good process to follow for the discussion that was being sought to be had.

I think the consultative process we've followed as a committee to date has also been good. I'm not going to say it's been perfect by any means. In a democracy, I doubt very much that it would be perfect. There will always be different people who think you should do things in different ways. By and large, however, I think it's been effective.

Perhaps I could take up Mr. MacGregor's question a little bit in answering yours. As I said before, we dealt with this issue when we started into it. The reality is that the construction of the committee really doesn't matter in terms of what colour your party's flag might be. Really, you have to operate by some sort of consensus. Otherwise, you'll be open to criticism no matter what. The numbers really don't matter, I would argue. It really only matters whether or not you got to consensus.

That's probably the first thing you should consider, and move forward from there.

● (1450)

[*Translation*]

Mr. Alain Rayes: I have a second question.

You said your mandate was to engage people and give them proper information so they make a good decision, without necessarily being guided. I find that fantastic. Well done.

Do you think your work resonated with the population, particularly young people?

Please answer quickly, because I'd like to turn the floor over to Scott Reid.

[*English*]

Mr. Jordan Brown: I think the reality is that it's probably too early to tell at this point in time. The actual plebiscite doesn't start until the end of this month. We'll know when we start to see the numbers come in. We'll know day by day how many people have voted and what the demographics look like. I can tell you then.

Right now I can tell you that half of the 4,500 students who would be eligible to vote have signed up to vote. I think that's fantastic, based on the traditional numbers you would get at a school level.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Alain Rayes: Thank you.

I'll let Mr. Reid ask the question he didn't have time for earlier.

[*English*]

Mr. Scott Reid: Thank you.

Mr. Russell, I wanted to follow up by delving a little more deeply into the comments you made in response to Mr. MacGregor's question.

You indicated that you think a single question on the ballot is preferable or a single option versus the status quo, as opposed to multiple options. It sounds to me, although you didn't quite say this, that you are expressing a fear that I have also had, which is that if you have multiple options, by necessity, they are not as fully fleshed out as a single option would be.

This leaves the executive branch ultimately responsible for working out the details and claiming they have a mandate from, in our case, the committee that gave it to them or alternatively from the voters in a referendum. However, they're not actually bound in all the particulars and potentially could adjust a little bit here and a little bit there in ways that may not be visible. This would result in a system that is not as fully proportional as would otherwise be the case. Once it's not proportional, by definition, that means that one party is getting more seats than its votes would warrant.

Maybe I missed it, but was that a concern you had?

Mr. Leonard Russell: I think that captures it pretty much.

Mr. Scott Reid: Thank you very much. We have a little bit of time left over, but you've been very indulgent, Mr. Chair, in the past, so....

The Chair: Thank you.

Ms. Sahota.

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

We've confirmed from both Mr. Brown and Mr. Russell that you sense that the federal government and this committee through our recommendation would be able to go it alone without a referendum. We hear a lot of criticism that if we go to a referendum it would be because we wanted to kill the idea of reform and we didn't actually want reform. Whether it's valid or not, that is what we constantly hear from people who want change.

Despite that, your committee chose to go the referendum route and you're doing it not only for the first time but the second time. In answer to my colleague's question you said you're doing it for confidence. Is that correct? Is that what you said, Mr. Brown, that you needed to be confident in your decision this time around?

● (1455)

Mr. Jordan Brown: I'll clarify two things again. One is that it wasn't our decision as to whether we have a plebiscite or not. That was a decision of the legislature and the executive government leading into it. The underlying presumption was that we did not start out from the supposition that change was something that Islanders wanted.

To give you a better context, historically, we have a very high voter turnout on Prince Edward Island relative to the rest of the country. That's not to say people are fully satisfied with our electoral system, but I would argue it does indicate some level of confidence in the democracy that we have. That aside, there was a recognition that a conversation would be a good thing to have to test that level of confidence and to see if there was a better way to do things.

Ms. Ruby Sahota: Was your committee responsible for setting up the plebiscite the way it is, with the options that you have come to and the different systems on your ballot?

Mr. Jordan Brown: Yes.

Ms. Ruby Sahota: Looking at the ballot and all the options that you have, do you find that you're going to confidently be able to gauge public opinion as to what kind of change people in P.E.I. want, because you're really splitting public opinion many ways? I know you said that when you had consultations, most of the people said they wanted change. They knew they wanted change, but they had a whole bunch of systems in their minds.

Essentially, are you not going to get that again as the result of your referendum? You're not going to have one system ranking all that much higher than any other.

Mr. Jordan Brown: Yes.

I think for us that probably is Leonard's elephant in the room. When I say that, what I really mean is that this has always been the fear that we've had. By putting too much on the plate of Islanders, they have the potential to get overwhelmed. It would be ideal if you could have, say, three systems on a ballot and you put them to Islanders. The problem with that is that when we went out to try to bring together the principles that Islanders had advanced to us and bring them down to a fine enough point to get them on a ballot, they didn't easily fit into three different silos.

We're charged with a mandate to engage Islanders and to effectively move the conversation along and so—

Ms. Ruby Sahota: You might engage them, considering you have high registration rates. I'm quite impressed by the numbers you were citing. You might spark their interest and educate them through this process, but are you really going to get a result that will accurately state which way they are going? I have my doubts about that.

You have an option for first past the post plus leaders. That's not an idea we've entertained yet. Could you explain that system a bit?

Mr. Jordan Brown: Yes. Basically, the “first past the post plus leaders” system was presented to us on a number of different occasions. We first heard about it on the day we had Mr. Russell and former chief justice Carruthers in to present to our committee. Then, we heard about it from a couple of former and a couple of sitting MLAs, and consistently from a few others. It's something that's been floating around Prince Edward Island for a little while.

The essence of the system is that you maintain, for the most part, the first-past-the-post voting system, but that leaders do not run in their own seats. They run with the whole island as their constituency, on the popular support of their party. In order to attain a seat, their party has to surpass the 10% popular vote threshold. When they do, that party has a seat for its leader in the legislature without having to be elected in a particular jurisdiction.

Ms. Ruby Sahota: Interesting. I have heard that people want to vote for their leader, just as people do for the U.S. presidency. I've heard that notion among friends and other people before, but I don't think anyone has brought that proposal before this committee.

● (1500)

Mr. Jordan Brown: Particularly on Prince Edward Island, it became.... What we first heard about it is that it would help to eliminate one-member oppositions, in a way. Parties that end up getting to that 10% threshold are automatically there to represent the perspective of those who have voted for them, so the likelihood of a one-member opposition is probably greatly diminished by that system.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

This has been really wonderful. Before the panel got started I was speaking to Dara Lithwick, the analyst right here next to me. She said, “Great panel”, and I said, “Yes, great panel, great location, a great day, in essence a perfect moment.”

Thank you for providing that for us. We learned a great deal, obviously, so we appreciate your making the time.

We're going to break for about five minutes and then we'll get going with the other panel.

● (1500)

(Pause)

● (1510)

The Chair: Welcome back everyone.

Welcome to our new panel. We have with us Jane Ledwell, executive director of the Prince Edward Island Advisory Council on the Status of Women. We also have with us Marcia Carroll, executive director of the P.E.I. Council of People with Disabilities. Finally, we have Marie Burge from the Cooper Institute, here in P.E.I.

Each witness will have five minutes to present. If you were here for the first panel, you'll know the way we operate. After the presentations from the witnesses, we have one round of questioning of five minutes for each member, and the five minutes includes answers as well as questions.

Without further ado, I give the floor to Ms. Ledwell.

Ms. Jane Ledwell (Executive Director, P.E.I. Advisory Council on the Status of Women): Thank you very much.

I'm honoured to be here today on behalf of the P.E.I. Advisory Council on the Status of Women. The advisory council is an arm's-length provincial government agency made up of members from across Prince Edward Island appointed to the council by the provincial government.

The provincial government strives to ensure that the appointments reflect diversity. Current members include women of a variety of ages, abilities, and backgrounds. We have members who are newcomers to Canada and to Prince Edward Island; and women who are part of the LGBTQ community, the francophone community, and indigenous communities.

The advisory council has a legislated mandate to advise the provincial government and to provide education to the general public on issues that affect the status of Prince Edward Island women. The under-representation of women at all levels of government is an issue that profoundly affects the status of women.

For more than 10 years, the advisory council has had a position in favour of proportional representation as an electoral system. We are persuaded by evidence from around the world that jurisdictions that use proportional representation systems tend to elect more women to their Parliaments for a variety of reasons. We advocated for proportional representation during Prince Edward Island's 2005 plebiscite. Today, in 2016, we are working very hard as part of the P.E.I. coalition for proportional representation to encourage Islanders to vote for proportional representation in the plebiscite that begins at the end of this month.

Because our mandate is provincial, when we talk about electoral reform, it's primarily in the context of electoral reform for Prince Edward Island. Our analysis is focused on the five electoral options that will be listed on the Prince Edward Island electoral reform plebiscite ballot, but I hope you will find these have some relevance for the federal discussion.

Along with the P.E.I. Coalition for Women in Government, from whom you'll hear in their own right this evening, we recently did some gender and diversity analysis—what is sometimes called GBA + at the federal level—of the five electoral options for Prince Edward Island to determine which options support women's equality and greater diversity. We've provided copies of our full report entitled “A Preference for Equality” as a reference document.

The five ballot options on the P.E.I. plebiscite ballot include three winner-take-all options. These are the first-past-the-post system, first past the post plus leaders, and preferential voting as part of a winner-take-all system. There are two proportional representation electoral systems. These are dual-member proportional, which is a new mixed proportional system you'll hear more about later today, and mixed member proportional, which I think you've heard plenty about.

The model of mixed member proportional that's being proposed for P.E.I. is based on two-thirds of the seats being elected at the district level and one-third of seats elected from province-wide lists in an open-list model, where voters, not parties, directly choose the top candidates from that list. I made that distinction because it does have relevance to our analysis.

Our analysis of gender and diversity factors demonstrates, we believe, that proportional representation options have some distinct advantages in promoting some factors that are really important to us, with an increase in the number of women elected being the first and most important factor. The number of women elected under the first-past-the-post system has been stagnant or decreasing in P.E.I., and electoral systems worldwide that use PR elect an average of 8% more women.

We looked at the likelihood of more women, more diverse women, and more diverse candidates being elected from smaller parties, because smaller parties, the third and fourth parties in Prince Edward Island, have tended to nominate more women, more diverse women, and more diverse candidates overall, except as leaders.

The note about leaders is important because one of the options on the ballot—first past the post plus leaders—would almost certainly result in seats in the legislature for some third and fourth parties, but only for leaders. We've only had four female party leaders in P.E.I. history, among all the parties.

Promoting an increase in collaborative processes is another value according to which we assessed the options. Some women have described combative legislatures as a barrier to running for office, and some systems increase the likelihood of collaboration because they often result in a coalition being needed to advance the political agenda.

● (1515)

We next looked at promoting a decrease in negative campaigning because an electoral system that reduces the rewards of a personal or partisan attack in campaigning could be supportive of women. We know that negative campaigning is frequently influenced by biases about gender, race, class, ability, and other diversity factors. It should be noted that our analysis suggests that preferential voting would also have a positive affect on negative campaigning because it would reduce the rewards. Anyone seeking someone's second, third, or fourth ranking, if not their first ranking, doesn't want to run down opponents.

Those were the advantages we saw in proportional representation. Our further analysis suggested some specific advantages for mixed member systems as a result of the changes that would happen in the nomination processes. I can answer questions about those later.

As part of our analysis we also put together a quiz for Islanders to help them match their democratic values with the systems that are on offer in Prince Edward Island. Over 450 people have taken that quiz and the results so far are that 87% of respondents have stated a preference for democratic values that align best with one of the two proportional representation options that are on the P.E.I. plebiscite.

● (1520)

The Chair: Thanks very much.

We'll go now to Ms. Carroll.

Ms. Marcia Carroll (Executive Director, PEI Council of People with Disabilities): Thank you, members of Parliament and members of the Special Committee on Electoral Reform, for inviting me here today to talk about how electoral reform can assist people with disabilities in being better represented in our elected bodies.

I'd also like to take a moment now to acknowledge the Mi'kmaq first nations peoples whose traditional land we are gathering on today.

Statistics tell us that 3.7 million people are living with disabilities in Canada. This represents over 10% of the Canadian population, yet this is not reflected in our elected bodies nationally or provincially. Our current federal government for the first time in history appointed a minister responsible for people with disabilities. This is a first good step, but we believe if we had a proportional electoral system, we would see elected bodies truly reflect the diversity of our communities.

If we had a PR system, it would allow for the number of seats captured in the legislature to truly reflect the percentage of popular votes cast at the ballot box and move us away from the winner-loser mentality that we currently have in our first-past-the-post system. A PR system encourages parties to be more conciliatory, more open to co-operation and collaboration, thus eliminating and reducing the adversarial nature of our current first-past-the-post system. This has the potential to create an environment for people from diverse groups to feel more valued, which will increase our participation in the electoral process.

A PR system would greatly reduce wasted votes, resulting in increased voter engagement and a reduction in voter apathy. A PR system would ensure that minority parties had access to representation, resulting in a multitude of voices being heard to shape legislature and policy. A PR system would encourage parties to campaign beyond the districts in which they are strong or where the results are expected to be close. PR systems are designed to maximize the overall vote regardless of where the votes might come from, resulting in a system where all votes truly matter. A PR system is less likely to lead to situations where a single party holds all the seats in a given province or district, again honouring our diversity.

A PR system would lead to greater continuity and stability in our policy development. First-past-the-post systems make long-term social and economic planning more difficult. PR coalition governments help engender stability and a coherence in decision-making that would allow our national development to benefit the majority of citizens. This is a key point for people with disabilities. When we have opposing parties with ideologies that are very different from one another, which continue from one election to another so they can get elected, we see extreme changes in social policy with regard to dealing with vulnerable people. We've seen that in our last government, as funding was stripped away from many sectors that serve our most vulnerable in this country. Now we're seeing that being reversed with our current government. This is a huge cost to the taxpayer, to the well-being of the individuals whom government is supposed to be serving.

All these reasons listed above would create more diversity in our House of Commons and our other elected bodies. It would result in more people living with disabilities running for office, as they would no longer be at the whim of a two-party system that uses the disability rights movement as a political football.

Fairness and plurality are fundamental Canadian values, and a PR system would honour those values and create a true democracy.

Thank you.

● (1525)

The Chair: Thank you very much.

We'll go now to Ms. Burge.

Ms. Marie Burge (Member, Cooper Institute): First of all, thank you for the invitation to Cooper Institute to come and present this afternoon. It's wonderful to be able to make this presentation on behalf of Cooper Institute.

I'd like to thank you especially for taking the lid off Leonard Russell. We haven't heard Leonard Russell talk like that since 2005, and he didn't talk like that in 2005. That was a joy, I must say. I was around in 2005, as you can probably guess.

I'll just say a little about Cooper Institute and how we figure into this. Cooper Institute is a community-based social justice collective. We work in communities across Prince Edward Island on social, economic, and ecological issues that are vital to island residents. The objective of all our work—we have deliberately chosen our objective—is the promotion of democracy. It's for the voice of people to come from the people. What we want is a full promotion of democracy in its full meaning.

We are proud members of the P.E.I. coalition for proportional representation, so you might hear a bit of a bias.

We welcomed the opening up of the electoral reform prospects again for P.E.I. It was really important that it be opened up again, because it was not addressed properly and fully in 2005 because of a lot of restrictions, which Leonard brought out. It's also really good to have this question brought up on the federal level.

We long to see the end of the first-past-the-post system—that it's gone, period—and we really hope for proportional representation.

It is surprising and a bit disheartening, however, that both levels of government, if supporting any change—and I'll put the "if" there—seem to be leaning in favour of a preferential ballot, ranked ballot, alternative vote, or whatever you want to call it. In the case of P.E.I., there are signs that, in the midst of all this discussion, the powers within the Liberal and Conservative parties may even be promoting retaining first past the post, which has served them well over the years. The resulting lopsided majorities and absolute power have not served Islanders well. They have served the parties well.

Preferential ballot is not an electoral system. Research shows that this method serves up similar lopsided majorities and absolute power to first past the post. Preferential ballot is merely a mechanism. It should not be on our list. It is not a choice. That's the first point.

Preferential ballot is merely a mechanism, and it can be used within various systems. It's how the votes are counted and the manner in which people actually express their vote, in terms of one, two, or three. It is a helpful mechanism for vote counting in both the winner-take-all systems and the proportional systems. It's a mechanism, not a system. There is no place in the world where ranked ballot or preferential ballot is used as an electoral system. It will be a very accommodating mechanism for us in calculating the results of the P.E.I. plebiscite, so again, it's a mechanism that will be used, but it shouldn't be on our plebiscite ballot.

Some commentators have pointed out that AV even appears to be a partisan solution for one party. The projections are that the Liberals would have won 224 seats in the last election if we had used preferential ballot. When we look at that, we really have to say it's a criticism, and it certainly is not a leaning that we would expect to come from the federal government.

I just have some comments on the plebiscite. A plebiscite, first of all, is a flawed instrument for democratic decision-making on electoral reform. That's our position. First of all, the results of a plebiscite are not binding on the government. People may be shocked. Voters would be really shocked to discover that, once again, their vote means so little.

● (1530)

The choices on the plebiscite ballot involve the creation of new knowledge on the part of voters. New knowledge doesn't come from the top down. It doesn't come from consultations. It doesn't come from lectures, and it doesn't come from displays. It comes from the full engagement of people in their communities and from their own interests. This takes time, it takes resources, and it takes non-interference from the defenders of power.

The other thing about plebiscites is that democracy is not enhanced by resorting to an election-style campaign to convince people to opt for one choice over another, without regard for voters really understanding the advantages and disadvantages of each option for a community's well-being.

We have another situation across the country, but we especially experience it here in P.E.I., which is that the Canadian election culture is, unfortunately, rooted in the mentality of a two-party system, even though we have a history of many parties at the federal level, although not so much at the provincial level. We have a two-party mentality. We hear in P.E.I. a lot, and I'm sure you hear it across the country, that a third or fourth party took the votes away. They took somebody's vote away because they voted for the NDP or the Green Party. That's the language we hear.

The experience of voting Liberal or Conservative, which is P.C. in P.E.I., in a winner-loser sports model, gives us a grim picture of two parties vying with each other for absolute power. We have not just a two-party system mentality but two parties. Any real transition to a democratic and representative democracy will require some serious growing up on the part of political parties. The test of maturity is that they acknowledge that democracy is not about them. Democracy is not about political parties. In a truly democratic electoral system, every person's vote counts. We know all of that.

Something that touches us really deeply, as one of the Atlantic provinces, is the fact that in the federal election, the Liberals won every seat in Atlantic Canada, despite the fact that 40% of the region's voters actually voted for other parties. We have right in front of us here, close to home, an example of the total wipeout of other parties.

Finally, from our perspective, only proportional representation can give us any semblance of opening up true democracy as the voice of people. Once again, we say that this is not only the parties. We must adopt a form of government that truly represents the makeup of a community in terms of gender, ethnicity, country of origin, ability, and race.

Thank you very much.

The Chair: Thank you.

We'll go to our rounds of questioning, starting with Mr. Aldag.

Mr. John Aldag: Thank you.

It's wonderful to have the diversity of opinions you presented today. It's a bit different from our first panel. It's always fantastic when we have an all-female panel. The perspectives you bring are really appreciated.

Again, there are newcomers in the audience. I look forward to hearing from members of the public this afternoon. Thanks for joining us.

I'm going to begin with a bit of a discussion about proportional representation. Each of you has spoken very succinctly about the benefits of change and about doing something other than first past the post. As we've travelled the country, we've heard many positive things about proportional representation systems.

We have seen electoral reform before, and in some cases, it has failed and we have ended up remaining with first past the post. I'm hopeful that our committee is going to be able to come up with a consensus report that will give our government something to work with. If any or all of your organizations have looked at the possibility of improvements within the existing system, I'd like your thoughts on what some of those things could be.

As an example, if we're concerned about women's low participate rate, what kinds of incentives can be given? What kinds of disincentives can be created for parties? It is the same for persons with disabilities and others who may be disenfranchised from participating. I'd simply like to throw that out, if any of your organizations have looked within the first-past-the-post system. Are there other improvements that could be made?

Second, when you balance out those kinds of improvements versus moving completely to a proportional representation system, are you still committed to PR or some form of PR as the preferred solution?

The first part is whether there are other things we could do within the existing system, and the second is, given the option, which is the best way to go.

● (1535)

Ms. Jane Ledwell: I don't mind starting.

First, significant changes could be made to help increase the number of women in politics in the current system, and I would submit, in any electoral system that we change to. I don't think it's inherent in this system or in any system to provide incentives and supports of the kinds that are needed to genuinely increase the number of women. Those incentives need to include things like mandated targets for diversity, requirements to comply with targets or explain missed targets, comply and explain mechanisms, financial incentives, or penalties for meeting targets. Best practices are legislated quotas, but there's no appetite for that in Prince Edward Island or here. We would be in favour of more positive incentives than negative incentives.

Then there are direct supports for candidates that would increase the number of women and diverse groups. That could include child care expenses being covered, which they currently aren't under what Elections P.E.I. is able to cover as a support during elections, direct financial support, some things like that. All systems, including first past the post, require those kinds of things. They are not inherent in the electoral system, but in the structures we put around it.

Mr. John Aldag: Just to clarify, you're saying that under any system, those types of things could be put in place to improve the participation of women. You've given a nice package of options, and I don't think we've heard all of them before. If you have something prepared that you could submit to the committee that we could consider, that would be really useful.

Ms. Jane Ledwell: We would probably do that through the Coalition for Women in Government. I think they've probably got a little more information on that, but yes.

Mr. John Aldag: That's perfect, thanks.

Ms. Marcia Carroll: I would agree with Jane and most of the statements she's making. Those types of incentives could be imposed to encourage people with disabilities to run as well and be engaged in the electoral system. Currently, we know that people with disabilities in this country are some of the poorest and most disenfranchised. To have those individuals run against somebody in their community who is known to one of the parties in power in our first-past-the-post system is very frightening.

We hear that all the time from the people we talk to when it comes time for elections. We really encourage people with a disability to go through a nomination process and try to be represented on the ballot. More often than not, they don't want to go against one of the other parties and they're not encouraged within our two-party system to be their candidate.

Mr. John Aldag: That's an interesting one. Why wouldn't you encourage persons with disabilities and other challenges to run within one of the main two parties? It's a bit disheartening to hear that there may be barriers within existing systems, within the main parties, to prevent that.

Are there things that parties should be considering to be more inclusive in the nomination process?

Ms. Marcia Carroll: Absolutely. There are ways you can support people with disabilities, like holding your nomination meetings in accessible buildings, using plain language when you develop your platforms, having your materials in alternative formats such as Braille, having sign language at meetings like today's or in the nomination process. When they don't have them, those are all barriers for people with disabilities. It doesn't—

● (1540)

The Chair: Thank you.

You can finish the thought, but we have to move on after listening.

Ms. Marcia Carroll: It's a way to create an inclusive space and allow people with disabilities to feel valued.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Reid.

Mr. Scott Reid: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Ms. Carroll, following up on your concluding remarks, in my party, the Conservative Party, in 2008, I proposed an amendment to our constitution to change the way in which we elect our leader so that it would take place by means of a mail-in ballot. That was partly to deal with accessibility issues for people who are disabled or for people who are far away from polling stations and don't have a driver's licence, and so on. Obviously, the same problems that exist in a party exist within a federal or provincial electoral system. I think you are right to be concerned.

Also, there is no regulation that requires nominations to be in accessible buildings, although there are rules about formal polling stations under the Canada Elections Act, so that's good advice for those of us, Ms. Sahota and I, for example, who sit on another committee that deals with reviewing the Elections Act. Thank you for that thought.

Ms. Marcia Carroll: Another thing as well is that there are no regulations around campaign headquarters being in accessible buildings, which really dissuades people from being involved in the electoral process, from being engaged in promoting the candidates they believe in.

Mr. Scott Reid: Although at least at that level I can say, as somebody who has been a candidate six times now, you have a strong incentive to get people involved and you don't want to turn people away, so at least that's there. For nominations, I'm not so sure.

I wanted to ask you, Ms. Carroll, a question and I'd like to ask Ms. Ledwell about it as well, and if we have time also Ms. Burge. There were criticisms of the way in which the plebiscite was conducted in 2005, or 2007—whatever the year was—in that not enough information was put out. There were also complaints about accessibility, a smaller number of polling stations than normal. This time around, as I understand it, a completely different approach is going on. It's over several days instead of one day, and it's electronic, at least for those who want to use that.

In your view, is this a good way of handling this issue? I'm interested in what you you have to say on this. One of our mandates is to look at electronic voting and accessibility issues, so I'll put that out first to Ms. Carroll, and then to Ms. Ledwell and Ms. Burge.

Ms. Marcia Carroll: I think those are positive steps. Any way you can get voters to get out and vote is certainly something we would support.

One of the challenges with the current plebiscite is the ballot. It's certainly confusing. Now you have to fill in the circle where traditionally for hundreds of years Islanders have voted with Xs. There is some stuff that makes it feel like they're not really trying to be as accessible as they're saying they're trying to be.

Mr. Scott Reid: Have they accommodated visually impaired people with that? I know there is a system. Under the first-past-the-post system you get a template. If you're visually impaired or you're completely blind they tell you that candidate A is here and candidate B is there, and you know where to go. The officer leaves and you can tick off the right box. Is there something for visually impaired people?

Ms. Marcia Carroll: Therein lies a challenge because we've never been consulted on how the ballot should look and how people with visual impairment should be encouraged or supported to vote.

Mr. Scott Reid: Thank you.

Is there time for Ms. Ledwell?

Ms. Jane Ledwell: Just briefly, I'd say that I think Elections P.E.I. is doing a much better job on public education and engagement than in the 2005 plebiscite, and that the ballot is a challenge.

The titles of the electoral systems are a challenge. There's no plain language lens that is going to let you describe five electoral systems in any way that is understandable, and the translations into French are even less accessible.

Mr. Scott Reid: That's an interesting point.

Before we go to Ms. Burge, is this a problem that could have been overcome or is it a problem that, in your mind, is insurmountable? This is obviously relevant when we look toward the federal context.

Ms. Jane Ledwell: If you are faced with a ballot with a title of an electoral system, that is challenging, yes.

Mr. Scott Reid: Sure, thank you.

Ms. Burge.

● (1545)

Ms. Marie Burge: One of the concerns I have about people having access to voting is that P.E.I. has to be the centre of patronage. It's really hard to explain to people how difficult it is for an Islander to actually be free to vote because there is a lot of political party control over people's lives. It has to do with the level of poverty that's here. That's probably true in other regions of the country that have similar levels, but in P.E.I. once we hear that one of the major parties, or both of them, are contacting voters, that has an influence that you cannot imagine anywhere else because for people their livelihoods and the lives of their families are very connected to two parties, and has been. It's a long history and parties have used that. They use it on election day. They use it during election campaigns in ways that are quite astounding.

When we're talking about the access that people have, the access of the general public to actual free decisions about their vote is very limited.

The Chair: Thank you.

We'll go to Mr. Cullen.

Mr. Nathan Cullen: Thank you to our panel, and thank you, Ms. Carroll, for recognizing that this meeting is taking place on Mi'kmaq traditional territory and to them for allowing us to do our business here.

There must be something in the water in Prince Edward Island. I'm finding the testimony today both incredibly revealing and somewhat breathtaking. Not only are we naming the elephants in the room, but we're kind of elephant hunting right now.

Ms. Carroll, you said folks with disabilities feel intimidated by the notion of running for another party because of the political consequence that might have. Did I hear you right?

Ms. Marcia Carroll: That's exactly what I said. Did you want me to elaborate?

Mr. Nathan Cullen: No, but the remedy to this, I would say to my friends, is not that they should just run for one of those main two parties; it's that they shouldn't be intimidated from running for whoever the hell they want.

Ms. Marcia Carroll: Well, in an ideal world—

Mr. Nathan Cullen: Wouldn't that be an ideal situation where you could...?

Ms. Marcia Carroll: I think what Marie has just said in the context of P.E.I. and the level of patronage that we have here was that, if you're an extremely poor individual but very politically astute and very politically motivated and want to run for a party, and you want to run for a party that you know is not going to be in power, you wonder how that's going to play out when the person you ran against becomes the minister of social services and that's where you get your cheque every month.

Mr. Nathan Cullen: This is devastating testimony.

Ms. Ledwell, Canada ranks 64th in the world right now in terms of electing women, being outpaced by such beacons of democracy as Iraq, Afghanistan, South Sudan, and other places. We get some folks coming to us and saying, “Well, if it ain't broke, don't fix it” or “It has worked out fine for me.” Nine times out of 10 people testifying that way are male, north of 60, and things have worked out well for them, broadly speaking, under first past the post.

Your research has shown 8% more women get elected under proportional systems. Is that what you said?

Ms. Jane Ledwell: On average, yes.

Mr. Nathan Cullen: You're drawing a straight line between those proportional systems and the political cultures they create being more attractive to women. Is that what I understand?

Ms. Jane Ledwell: Yes.

Mr. Nathan Cullen: Why is that?

Ms. Jane Ledwell: We started with the barriers that women in Prince Edward Island have reported in local research, whether the barrier was to running for political office or to then being elected. The evidence from the Coalition for Women in Government has been that voters don't discriminate against women at the polls, so there has to be something else going on.

There has to be a way of getting women on the ballot, because then they will be considered fairly. There are a lot of factors that go into a person's decision to be on a ballot or not. Some of those are values questions and some of them are structural impediments, so we've taken a look at both of those factors. On the whole, our assessment is that different electoral systems can influence a political culture in a way that can then create more opportunity for equality.

● (1550)

Mr. Nathan Cullen: That, I would imagine, would be in combination with changing the way the parties conduct themselves. We have a bill in Parliament, which has been mentioned a few times now, in which there would be an incentive to parties in terms of how much money they would be reimbursed by taxpayers to have more women and people of diversity run for them.

Has this been something contemplated in Prince Edward Island and is it something your coalition might support?

Ms. Jane Ledwell: A lot of our energy has gone into electoral reform, for the obvious reason that we've had two plebiscites in the last 11 years. That's where the focus has been, because it's the biggest opportunity for the most significant change. But under all the electoral systems, there are opportunities and, really, advantages to establishing incentive or disincentive programs and increasing the supports for candidates to increase equality and diversity.

Clearly, we would like to support all of those things happening, those incentives and supports being put in place—

Mr. Nathan Cullen: But it's not an either-or.

Ms. Jane Ledwell: It's not an either-or, because those are not inherent in the electoral systems. They're not natural to electoral systems and the electoral system can only contribute one part of a political culture. The evidence over time is that when you have a more diverse and more representative government, it should follow that those factors that affect equality and diversity in everyday life—

Mr. Nathan Cullen: Start coming through the parties....

Ms. Jane Ledwell: —help to come through. Yes.

Mr. Nathan Cullen: Just because I'm running out of time, I apologize, but my last question is to Ms. Burge.

You said something to the effect that there's a lot of growing up we need to do and that a sign of maturity is that politicians realize democracy is not about the parties.

Ms. Marie Burge: Right.

Mr. Nathan Cullen: There was this sobering moment when Mr. Russell testified in front of us that once the calculations had actually been done by the parties as to what electoral reform might mean for them, never mind the voters, then suddenly it was undermined. Suddenly the whisper campaign...I heard that priests watched it happen in their church congregations. Organizations were employed. Is there anything that you want to elaborate on with that?

Ms. Marie Burge: It's very obvious to us that in Prince Edward Island, everything that has to do with the political system belongs to two parties in the minds of people. What we're seeing is that the capacity of the two major parties to deliberately influence how people make choices in the community is very strong. Now we're in the midst of this plebiscite and our question is what are they doing because it's not very clear to us what the major parties are doing. A major Conservative and a major Liberal both came out saying clearly that first past the post is fine and they're major voices. People can just then think, well, it's just one person, but those are major powerful voices in the small community.

We have a great advantage on P.E.I. because we're very close to our politicians, but it's also a great drawback because the power they have over us is extreme.

The Chair: Thank you.

Go ahead, Ms. May.

Ms. Elizabeth May: I want to thank all three witnesses because it's a very helpful panel. I wish I could spend time with you, Marie Burge. Let me just say that I completely know what you're talking about. I'm from Cape Breton and I ran for office in Pictou county. I had people say to me, "I wanted to vote for you, but my uncle has the job in the winter with the snowplow." I don't know that everyone around this table would believe the level of transactional political awareness that happens probably to this day and probably more in the Maritimes than anywhere else.

However, I want to dive into the question about women getting elected under PR systems because there is an ongoing little debate that happens around this table.

Jane Ledwell I want to ask you, because I think you put your finger on it, about the culture created by first past the post. It's not just the culture that happens in Parliament where we can exercise great collaborative tendencies on our own as individuals. You mentioned that with proportional representation, your analysis was —and I think I got this right when I was taking notes—we see a decrease in negative campaigning. My concern around first past the post and the incentives for hyper-partisanship and for wedge issues is that it resides much more in the people who are never elected and the public never sees, the political strategists who run campaigns.

I wanted to open up the campaigning lens and ask you more about that before I turn to a few other points. What did your analysis show about the nature of campaigning?

● (1555)

Ms. Jane Ledwell: Most things in electoral reform discussions in Prince Edward Island stem from things that we've witnessed and seen very directly in our small community and that affect people. There were specific incidents in the last election. There were women who were running who didn't fit into the traditional categories. They didn't look like politicians on P.E.I. Most politicians on P.E.I. have looked fairly white, fairly male, fairly middle-aged and older. This is not an unfamiliar scenario.

Ms. Elizabeth May: It certainly doesn't apply to the four Liberal members of Parliament for P.E.I. at the moment, does it? No, never mind. Go ahead.

Ms. Jane Ledwell: No comment.

We had some really interesting things happen in the campaign. A really positive example was a woman with a disability who was running for the NDP, and she and a woman who was running for the Green Party held joint campaign events that people could come to, in accessible locations. They did some really interesting collaborative things on the campaign that first past the post discourages, or certainly doesn't incentivize. We also had specific racial and gendered slurs against a woman from the Mi'kmaq community who was running for the NDP, in this case for elected office.

Those individual stories and real experiences that affect real people as candidates focus our attention on the necessity to decrease negative campaigning. In addition, we know that negative campaigning for women looks different from negative campaigning for men. We can see this very clearly in the subtle dynamics, not to mention the less-than-subtle dynamics, in the presidential campaign in the United States where we have a very stark difference between a female presidential candidate and a male presidential candidate.

Ms. Elizabeth May: This is is the nature of the debate that I'm having, and you'll probably find out soon who raises it most. But we know that statistically, empirically, there's no gainsaying that there's a higher proportion of women elected in countries that use proportional representation. But then you also get academics who say, which is true, "Well, we don't know there's any causality, it might be a coincidence".

I always think the example of Australia is very helpful, because if it's cultural and societal that PR countries elect more women, then you look at Australia where for the house in Australia, which uses a majoritarian system of ranked ballots, they have 26.7% women. But in the same country, where they elect their senate using a single transferrable vote PR, they have 38% women.

How would you explain this? We don't have academic literature that says there's causality between moving to PR and electing more women. But what does your analysis tell you about these differences?

Ms. Jane Ledwell: I think our focus was on the nomination process, because we've seen the nomination process as the biggest barrier to women getting elected. Getting the nomination is harder than being elected. When women are elected, their fortunes rise and fall in measure with the parties that they represent, so it shows that people aren't discriminating against women at the polls.

However, there are some of the proportional systems, particularly those that have some process of creating a list, that take us beyond selecting candidates district by district without a quota that is imposed. It's very hard to kind of influence one district to the next to get a half and half split at the end, because each of those contests is independent, each of those decisions is based on independent factors. When you're creating a list, there's an opportunity for positive pressure to include more women, to include more diversity. The pressure is at the door. The whole party is going to have to account for it if you have only a few women on your list. The whole party is going to account for it if you don't have enough rural representatives on that list, or if you have too many from one language group. All of these create some positive pressure to create diversity.

We have lists now, under the first-past-the-post system. We don't write names on ballots. We create a list, one by one, district by district, and party by party, without having any structures that allow for a broader consideration without imposing quotas.

● (1600)

The Chair: Thank you.

Ms. Romanado.

Mrs. Sherry Romanado: I wasn't going to go there, but—

It's a real pleasure to have the three of you here. I'm going to preface my comments because every time I ask a question, Twitter goes crazy and they assume the worst, but I have to ask the question.

In Parliament, only 26% of members are women. I absolutely want to see more women run for office at all levels of government. I don't want barriers for those with disabilities or minority groups. I'm just prefacing all of that.

That said, as we mentioned, Ms. Ledwell, the biggest barrier for women is the nomination process. When we get that nomination, when we're one of the candidates, we win—I'm living proof of that—but it's getting that nomination. Getting that nomination has nothing to do with the electoral system, the way we vote; it has to do with parties. Right? You mentioned that. You talked about incentivizing parties to run more women candidates.

We talked a bit about legislated quota requirements, financial incentives, and direct supports to candidates. You mentioned something about day care expenses. Actually, day care expenses are an allowable expense through Elections Canada, as are expenses for those who have a disability. I just want to clarify that.

Ms. Jane Ledwell: But not Elections P.E.I.

Mrs. Sherry Romanado: I don't control Elections PEI; I control elections federally. Well, I don't control them, but we're talking about elections federally. There are incentives to have more women run, so that's there.

In terms of getting more women elected, we talked about PR countries having more women elected. PR supports more smaller parties, smaller parties run more women as candidates, ergo there would be more women. What if we were to just have a quota system whereby all parties must run an equal amount of women or visible minorities? Wouldn't we then say we would increase our number of women in Parliament?

I'm playing devil's advocate because I'm trying to get women to run and I don't want them to think it's only an election system that's going to stop them, but that they can win.

Ms. Jane Ledwell: I'm going to let Marcia and Marie comment on this, because I think they have a lot of wisdom to share as well.

I'll just say, worldwide, the best practice is the legislated quota. If you can develop an appetite among your colleagues, among Canadians, and among Prince Edward Islanders for a legislated quota, go for it.

Ms. Marcia Carroll: If you only create incentives within the current system, Canada is still working within an archaic system that was created in medieval times, and I for one would like to believe we've evolved beyond that.

If we're just creating incentives, it's still a winner-loser mentality. We're not creating an atmosphere of collaboration.

Mrs. Sherry Romanado: I'm going to ask you a question. If there are five candidates in a riding, all women, even in proportional representation not all five are going to win.

Ms. Marcia Carroll: No, not all five are going to win.

Mrs. Sherry Romanado: There's going to be a loser there. I don't want to call them a loser, but someone will lose the election. Right?

Ms. Marcia Carroll: Not necessarily. Somebody will be the person chosen to represent the popular vote. We have to move away from winning and losing. We have to understand, and politicians need to understand, you're not there to win or lose, you're there to take—

Mrs. Sherry Romanado: We're there to represent.

Ms. Marcia Carroll: You're there to represent. If the majority of the popular vote says, "I don't want you to represent me", then you have to accept that. It's semantics. I guess we could say "winning" or "losing", but it really isn't about a win or lose mentality, it's about representation and a diversity of voices.

● (1605)

Mrs. Sherry Romanado: I agree with diversity. I'm trying not to argue, but I want to make sure that we all understand, that we're all talking about the same thing.

For every single one of us who was elected, regardless of how many people voted for us or didn't vote for us, when a citizen walks through that door to talk to us, we represent them, regardless. We don't even ask, "Did you vote for me?" I don't want to know. Everyone is represented. It may not be the person who you voted for, but you do get represented.

Ms. Marcia Carroll: I would strongly argue with that.

Mrs. Sherry Romanado: You would?

Ms. Marcia Carroll: Yes, I would.

Ms. Marie Burge: I would also.

Ms. Marcia Carroll: I think actually that's quite a naive notion.

Mrs. Sherry Romanado: Do you really feel that?

Ms. Marcia Carroll: I sincerely feel that.

Mrs. Sherry Romanado: Really?

Ms. Marcia Carroll: Yes. I absolutely do not feel that my values, or I, were represented for the 10 years that the Conservative government was in power. I don't feel that.

Mrs. Sherry Romanado: This is news. I'm glad you're talking about it, because if people honestly felt that, even though the person who was elected was elected and that person was the MP, but if they felt even after that person was elected that they couldn't go to him or her, that's important to know. It's really important to know that.

Ms. Marcia Carroll: It's particularly the environment on P.E.I. If you were the person who ran against the person who was elected, and then you had an issue that you wanted to bring forward to them, that creates a whole other dynamic.

Mrs. Sherry Romanado: This is good to know. This is the first time we're hearing this, that you felt, especially if you had run against the person, you couldn't go to that person and talk about a case or talk about your ideas. I'm going to note that because it is the first time we're hearing it.

In terms of getting more focus.... Am I out of time?

The Chair: Yes, pretty much.

Mrs. Sherry Romanado: Sorry. Hopefully someone will pick up on disabilities. I wanted to get on there.

The Chair: Thanks very much.

Mr. Richards.

Mr. Blake Richards: I'm just going to move over here where the mike's a little more accessible, speaking of accessibility.

I want to thank all of you for being here, and I want to in particular thank you, Ms. Ledwell and Ms. Carroll, for your work to make sure that you're doing everything you can to ensure better opportunities for women and disabled people to be part of the political system as candidates and, I would assume, as voters as well.

I wanted to just get your thoughts on a few of the other items that were in the Liberal Party platform. There are various options that were going to be looked at as part of this consultation process. You've, obviously, all expressed your viewpoints on proportional representation and your belief that it's the route you'd like to see. But they also listed the idea of a preferential ballot, and also talked about looking at online voting and mandatory voting.

I want to hear thoughts from the three of you on those topics and whether you think those should be looked at, and what your thoughts would be on those three things.

Ms. Marie Burge: I already expressed the concern that we have about preferential voting appearing anywhere as an electoral system. It's a handy mechanism. It's a tool. It's an instrument. It's a way of marking your ballot and it's a way of counting the ballots, but it's not an electoral system. It isn't anywhere an electoral system. It's very disturbing for us to hear, coming from the federal level, the possibility that maybe that's going to be considered as an electoral system.

Once again, it's a majoritarian system. There's no way that we would have any different relationship between the power of the so-called elected party and the other parties. It would not change that. That's just to say really as clearly as we can here that for us, it should not be an option. It shouldn't be one in P.E.I. It's giving a very bad recommendation to the rest of Canada that we have that on our plebiscite ballot to begin with. It's disheartening to think that might be a consideration at the federal level to avoid proportional representation.

Mr. Blake Richards: Ms. Carroll and Ms. Ledwell, do you have any thoughts on preferential ballots?

Ms. Marcia Carroll: I agree. I don't think preferential ballots are the way to go. Again, it's a mechanism that works within our current system to figure out who's going to win, if I can use that terminology, but it doesn't change how we capture our popular vote and how we capture the seats in our elected bodies. I don't see how that would be beneficial.

In regard to mandated voting, on P.E.I. that is not needed. We have a really active voter engagement level here on P.E.I.

● (1610)

Mr. Blake Richards: We just need to replicate whatever's being done here. Instead of trying to have it be compulsory, we just need to try to get the kind of engagement we have from voters in P.E.I. We just need to figure out what it is that's happening here, and what's causing that, and replicate it all across the country.

Ms. Marcia Carroll: We can talk later.

Mr. Blake Richards: Okay.

Ms. Jane Ledwell: I haven't done an intensive study of mandatory voting or of the electronic voting option. Both, I think, would be stronger proposals if put through a very strong gender lens and diversity lens to assess the positive and negative outcomes that could be associated with mandatory voting or with electronic voting. With mandatory voting I think there's some data that suggests that women are actually marginally less successful under mandatory voting systems. I just read it recently and I couldn't cite the source.

Mr. Blake Richards: I think we heard that from someone else, that was—

Ms. Jane Ledwell: I probably got it from the Twitter feed following this committee.

Mr. Blake Richards: I haven't been able to verify—

Ms. Jane Ledwell: Yes, I don't know that either.

Mr. Blake Richards: We certainly did hear that as well.

Ms. Jane Ledwell: Yes. With electronic voting, what barriers do to socio-economic factors might come about? I think a strong analysis that takes gender and diversity into consideration would be worth doing.

Mr. Blake Richards: Okay. On the preferential ballot, do you have any thoughts on that?

Ms. Jane Ledwell: The preferential ballot isn't our preferred option. It has a few advantages primarily on the negative campaigning side, but based on the factors that we looked at, it doesn't have as many advantages as the proportional systems on the P.E.I. ballot.

Mr. Blake Richards: Okay, thank you.

I don't know if there's any more time, but if there is, Ms. Burge, I know you didn't have a chance to comment on the online, because we're going to mandatory voting if there's any time left, but if you had any comments on that....

The Chair: You have the opportunity, briefly, for your comments.

Ms. Marie Burge: Online voting is going to encourage a whole other sector of society to get involved in voting, but we have to also see that there are people who don't have access. In P.E.I. we have people who don't have access to the Internet, and I'm sure that's the case in a lot of parts of Canada, as well.

Mr. Blake Richards: That would be an issue then as well. What are your thoughts about security issues or anything in that regard, as well as for online voting?

Ms. Marie Burge: We haven't heard that discussed that much.

The Chair: Okay, we'll have to move on now.

Let's move on to Mr. DeCourcey.

Mr. Matt DeCourcey: Thank you, Mr. Chair, and thank you everyone for being here this afternoon.

Ms. Carroll, you're at least the third person who has presented to the committee representing disability advocacy groups. We had one presentation in Winnipeg, and one in Toronto, and both those groups and the witnesses who presented on behalf of those groups did not come forth with a preferred voting system. The issues were more around accessibility to the ballot.

I wonder if you can direct us to any international evidence that you have that demonstrates how persons living with a disability perform better as far as their election to office in different countries who operate under different systems goes.

Ms. Marcia Carroll: I don't have that type of research. I have some research around diversity in general, and certainly you can point to the New Zealand system, which is fairly new. We know the native population is now represented. The amount of people who are native in that country are now represented in their legislature, and they say that's due to the proportional representation system.

I represent a provincial organization, and we don't have the capacity to do a lot of research, but we talk to our folks all the time. These are the conversations that we have with them, and we hear over and over again that they feel disempowered in the current system, and that if we had a proportional system, then they would feel more empowered and more valued.

People with disabilities innately are innovative. They learn how to navigate societies every day and communities every day that are not designed for them, so they're innovative by nature. They try to be collaborative and negotiate all the time just to navigate their world. They bring those skills to the table, and they would rather be working within systems that value negotiation and working together as opposed to the adversarial system we have.

● (1615)

Mr. Matt DeCourcey: That's excellent testimony, and something that I can appreciate and hope finds it way into the glut of recommendations that come down in our report.

It relates to the conversation that was ongoing earlier about how we support women in politics. Regardless of what electoral system is in operation, there needs to be a further commitment or mandate of the parties that incentivizes them or disciplines them should they not help fulfill certain quotas for women. I know we have touched on it a little, but do you see that sort of approach working with persons living with disabilities?

Ms. Marcia Carroll: I would lean toward an incentive model as opposed to a punishment model, if I can use that term, or a disincentive model. I started my presentation by saying that people with disabilities represent 10% of our population, and that certainly isn't what's representative in the House of Commons. We don't have 10% of our sitting members who are people living with disabilities.

Ideally we would, and ideally we would have 50% representation of women. I don't know if it's the committee's mandate. As a country, and particularly as a country with the values that Canada has, and to honour our diversity, we need to find a way to engage people and to have that plurality of representation in our House.

Mr. Matt DeCourcey: It may not be directly within our mandate, but we certainly have the purview to express what we've heard. We've heard compelling testimony from people representing the disability community. I expect that will find some footing in the report. I think that's all I have to contribute right now.

Thanks very much.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. DeCourcey.

Mr. MacGregor.

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

Ms. Carroll, I just want to revisit the exchange you had with Ms. Romanado.

It made me remember a story going back to my parents when I decided to join the NDP and get started on a long road. My parents come from the Liberal end of the spectrum. I remember their initial reaction was, “Oh, well, that's all well and good, but you might want to think about that in later years because it's not really going to be a path of success.” I remember saying to my parents, “It's not about winning or losing, it's about finding a party that aligns with my values.”

I think every constituent can go into an MP's office and get help. I know this because I used to be a constituency assistant. That's kind of separate from the policy work we do in Ottawa. For example, a New Democrat living in rural Alberta will get help from a Conservative MP, but that person's values will not be reflected in Parliament by that MP's work. It's similar to a Conservative here in Atlantic Canada.

When you said you had a very strong disagreement on that point, is that really what you were alluding to? Would you like to expand on that?

Ms. Marcia Carroll: What you talked about in terms of your history is very much an experience that I've had in my own family. I think all Islanders are pretty much.... You can say their last name, and we think we know how you vote because of your family of origin.

I come from a very political family, so if I chose to run for a party that wasn't Conservative or Liberal, I probably would have gotten the same feedback from my parents as you did. I'm glad that you followed your values and became successful in your path.

What I was really trying to say is, and I apologize if I came across too strongly, I really believe that if I were to sit in front of an MP who wasn't of the party that I was known to vote for—or people thought I voted for because, like I say, people assume that in P.E.I.—I still think that MP would try to help me to the best of their ability.

I don't know that I, as an individual, would reach out to that person because of the values they hold. Maybe that barrier is on me and not on the elected official. We hear the stories over and over again that they went to see the MP and, because of their political party of origin, if I can use that language, they felt their voice wasn't being heard.

● (1620)

Mr. Alistair MacGregor: Just continuing, I would like to hear feedback from all three of you.

On our first day of the Atlantic tour in Halifax, we heard from Professor James Bickerton. He had this quote about institutional changes to behaviour. Yes, there are ways that political parties can make themselves more accessible to reflect the diversity that is Canada, but it seems to me that a common point of origin is, if we can fix the voting system that affects all the parties instead of trying to get them individually to change, that might be an easier route. I'd love to hear your feedback on that particular quote.

Ms. Marie Burge: That was part of what I meant when I talked about parties. A well-functioning system that is proportional is going to make more demands on parties than anything else you've ever had. Parties will have to change their model of how they represent people, who they represent, and how they present themselves to the public.

When I watch and participate in electoral campaigns, I don't see much difference among the four parties as they're running, as far as their electoral tactics or campaign tactics go. They may be more subtle, but it's a game. It's a sports model or a business model. You have to have your brand and present your brand, and that type of thing.

I think that's where parties cause a lot of problems in the political system. The parties themselves cause some problems, because you almost have to buy into the system and get out and fight and try to talk about your opponent. It's quite a sick system. People say, “It ain't broke, so...”, but it is, really, right from the nomination system through the campaign to your positions as members of Parliament. You have a party frame around you that, in fact, has defined how you run your election campaigns.

I must say that the running of the election is not that different among all the parties. That's where a lot of growing up has to happen. Can we find parties that will learn, really learn, to collaborate? The example Jane gave from P.E.I. is a very touching example. Candidates from two different parties were working together in the campaign.

The Chair: In terms of trying to diminish the influence of parties, that seems to be the message I'm getting, to some extent. We've heard it elsewhere, too. In a PR system, such as mixed member, would party not become a little more prominent, because not only would you be voting for the local MP but you would also be voting purely for a party?

Ms. Jane Ledwell: The mixed member proportional model that's being looked at in Prince Edward Island is an open-list model. The party proposes the list, but voters select the candidate from that list as their first option. It's not a ranked list.

The Chair: Do they get two votes, one for the candidate and one for the party?

Ms. Jane Ledwell: No. They would get a vote for a district candidate under an FPTP model, the old-fashioned way. The vote for the candidate on the second part of the ballot, from the list, would be a vote for the party and the candidate combined.

The Chair: Okay, thank you.

Ms. Jane Ledwell: They could vote for two different parties.

Just to clarify the point about parties, when we began our gender and diversity analysis of the systems available to island voters, one of the first questions that came up was whether any of these systems would reduce the role of political parties. That was a value held by one of the people in the focus group very strongly, and probably more than one. None of the systems on offer truly reduce the role of political parties.

I should also mention that I recently came from national meetings of the National Coalition of Provincial and Territorial Advisory Councils on the Status of Women. My colleague in the Northwest Territories, where they have consensus government, has found that their analysis over time has shown that the absence of parties is a barrier to women, because the parties are able to buffer some of the financial inequalities between men and women as individual candidates.

● (1625)

The Chair: Okay, thanks very much for that clarification.

Mr. Nater.

Mr. John Nater (Perth—Wellington, CPC): Mr. Chair, I just want to begin by thanking, in particular, Ms. Carroll for her work on disability issues. Certainly when I served on municipal council, the issue of accessibility was always one of our primary concerns, whether it was recreational facilities or government offices. I have a mother-in-law who has disability issues. She lost her leg to amputation many years ago. It's certainly an issue I have a personal connection with and is something I am concerned about.

I want to follow up on a question Mr. Richards asked about the idea of a compulsory vote. You mentioned that voter turnout in P.E.I. is relatively high. I want to ask specifically about the disabilities issue. We know that about 3.7 million Canadians have disabilities. It goes beyond accessibility issues, which we almost think of off the tops of our heads. We realize that there's a large variety of disability issues.

How might a compulsory ballot affect the people you represent, those with a disability, any type of disability?

Ms. Marcia Carroll: How would mandatory voting affect people with disabilities?

Mr. John Nater: Exactly.

Ms. Marcia Carroll: I don't know that it would affect people with disabilities in any way that's different from how it would affect any other segment of society. Traditionally on P.E.I. we know that people with disabilities get out and vote. They show up to vote at a pretty high rate. We don't have the capacity to collect those statistics, but we know what the turnout is from the work we do to get our folks out and from what the candidates tell us. We also see that reflected in the policy of Elections P.E.I., to make sure that polls are accessible.

We already know that there is a pretty high turnout for people with disabilities. I don't think mandatory voting would change that. I certainly don't see it as having a negative effect.

But to tell you the truth, I haven't really done a deep analysis. I don't really feel qualified to answer that.

Mr. John Nater: Okay.

Ms. Burge, in your opening comments you said something to the effect that you would like to see the end of first past the post—gone, period. In the proposals for mixed member proportional, you would typically still have first past the post for electoral districts. Are you in favour of that, are you opposed to that part, or are you in favour of straight lists—

Ms. Marie Burge: The first part of the ballot, of course, is first past the post.

Mr. John Nater: So you're still in favour of that part.

Ms. Marie Burge: Sure. It's not the system. It's really important to keep the difference between the system and how voting is done. How voting is done is one thing. The system is something else. The system has to be the whole package. No, it works fine in that area, because we have a second vote, which then creates the full proportionality.

Mr. John Nater: I'd like to follow up on that second part, the regional representation or the added seats, if you will. As you know, P.E.I. is guaranteed in the Constitution a floor of four seats in the federal Parliament, based on the Senate floor. It is constitutionally guaranteed. I don't get the sense that there's a huge appetite out there to greatly increase the number of seats in Canada's Parliament—we're already at 338—but I could be wrong.

When you have a relatively small region such as P.E.I., with four seats, creating that second tier of members—I don't want to say "second tier", but I will for the sake of clarity—and doing that proportionally would be an awful challenge, I would think, with a limited number of seats, such as four. In terms of expanding the region to include the maritime provinces or all the Atlantic provinces, I think Mr. DeCourcey would agree that there are differences between the provinces.

I'm wondering how that might work with a small number of seats, such as the four seats in P.E.I.

Ms. Marie Burge: I have no idea how you'd have to work that out. You're going to have to work on it.

● (1630)

Mr. John Nater: Absolutely.

Ms. Marcia Carroll: I don't know how you'll work that out, but I think we need to look at the big picture as opposed to regions. With a proportional system, we would hear a variety of voices from across the country. It doesn't matter where they come from, because the parties would have the ideology, which then would be voted in, that would be represented proportionally in our legislature, which would cause our governments to work differently.

Mr. John Nater: Your recommendation is that the added seats, or additional seats, or whatever term we use—

A voice: Top-up seats.

Mr. John Nater: —the top-up seats wouldn't necessarily be tied to a region or a province, in your opinion.

Ms. Marcia Carroll: Well, I think they have to be tied to somewhere. They have to be tied to a province or a region.

For me, when you look at proportional representation, it's not the fact that P.E.I. has four seats. It's about how all the popular vote is reflected in the House, and then those voices are heard through representation of the popular vote. That currently doesn't happen.

Ms. Marie Burge: I would like to add that I wouldn't want to be the person proposing to Prince Edward Island that we would lose a seat or gain a seat.

A voice: Yes. Let's be clear on that.

Mr. John Nater: Constitutionally though, there are four senators and the number of seats cannot drop below four senators. That's guaranteed constitutionally.

The Chair: Thanks very much.

Ms. Sahota.

Ms. Ruby Sahota: Thank you.

To the panellists, you've all mentioned certain values that are important and the problems with first past the post. What issue would you rank, in whatever system we come up with as a committee, as the number one issue that this new first-past-the-post design would have to address?

Ms. Marie Burge: Collaboration would be number one, the fact that parties will and have to collaborate and in that collaboration a variety of voices have to be brought to the table that are not there now. If you have proportional representation, in fact you have more voices there than just those of the individuals who are present. You have the interests of the people, of the various sectors that you will then have represented, and that collaboration is key. We know from past experience that where we have parties collaborating, we have really good policy coming forward, so I would think the result of proportional representation on national policy would be really amazing.

There is something else. A study was done on climate change and the study showed that the more advanced the democratic system is, the higher the participation in work to make sure that climate change is on the agenda and is being worked on seriously. I really feel that not just the collaboration but the kinds of policies that come out of that will be totally different and progressive.

Ms. Ruby Sahota: Ms. Carroll.

Ms. Marcia Carroll: For me it would be the proportionality. It would be how the seats are divided up and who actually sits in those seats. If you capture a certain amount of the popular vote, that translates into a certain number of seats. That's not what currently happens. Right now we see a really disproportionate piece. There's a huge majority in our House right now. That's not what the popular vote reflects.

Ms. Ruby Sahota: Ms. Ledwell.

Ms. Jane Ledwell: I would say the principle and value behind our analysis has simply been that we wanted representation in parliaments, provincial and federal, that better reflects the diversity of Canadians, including the 50% who are women.

Ms. Ruby Sahota: Thank you. Collaboration, proportionality, and diversity are the three things.

Ms. Ledwell, you were saying that P.E.I. would not have an appetite for a quota system. Why do you feel that?

Ms. Jane Ledwell: It's not perceived as fair. It's perceived as a kind of imposed fairness. There's a kind of attachment to the idea that everyone has equality of opportunity with a level playing field.

● (1635)

Ms. Ruby Sahota: Would status of women not be advocating for that first and foremost since it is the quickest way to get that diversity and to get that balance of gender, whereas through another electoral system we may get 8%, I think you said, closer but we may never get there?

Ms. Jane Ledwell: It's been recommended, and the appetite has not been there.

Ms. Ruby Sahota: Having seen the results of the 2005 referendum, would you be able to say that the appetite is there for MMP?

Ms. Jane Ledwell: We're in the midst of a plebiscite and we're working really hard to help share information about the various systems. Our interest as an organization is in having people vote in a plebiscite with a system that best matches their values and to really understand what democratic values can be expressed through an electoral system, and also which ones can't, quite frankly.

I would hope that our engagement in the plebiscite wouldn't be interpreted as enthusiasm for going through a plebiscite process. The consensus among our council members is that in-depth consultation and meaningful discussion—such as what you are undertaking—across the province is a better option than a plebiscite or a referendum.

Ms. Ruby Sahota: Thank you to all of the panel members.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Sahota, and thank you to the witnesses, and thank you for the frank discussion. We're definitely taking away frank words from today's hearings, which help us immeasurably.

We'll start with Mr. Hunter for two minutes.

Go ahead, Mr. Hunter.

Mr. George Hunter (As an Individual): Yes, that was a big surprise. My name is George Hunter, and I'm from Kensington. I'm not really very educated about electoral reform, but I certainly like to follow Canadian politics and try to understand the American ones. I was thinking to tell you a little about politics. My little hometown of Kensington, with a population of about 1,300 people, had a chair for the chief magistrate and a chair for each one of the six councillors. There were two more chairs for the press, and one for the general public. This would be a municipal government. That's quite a way to run some kind of a democratic institution, but if they knew better, they'd do better, but that's Prince Edward Island politics in a way.

I noticed at the start that these public meetings pretty well run along the same lines where the meeting has an agenda for 90 minutes. The experts get to talk for 80 minutes and the general public for 10 minutes, so I'll be quiet on that.

The most unrepresented people that I know of anywhere probably work over here aboard this ship. These fellows get left behind by shipowners and people like that. They're not even supplied food and that. There's a great organization in New York City called the Center for Seafarers' Rights.

Anyway, I'll close her up.

● (1640)

The Chair: Thank you for your comments, Mr. Hunter. We appreciate them. You're talking about the need for more democracy.

Go ahead, Ms. Oslawsky.

Ms. Brenda Oslawsky (As an Individual): Hello. My name is Brenda Oslawsky, and I'm on the national council of Fair Vote Canada, which is a member group of the P.E.I. coalition for proportional representation.

It's been more than a year since the current provincial government announced a plebiscite on electoral reform. In my experience of going door to door and at event stalls, I found only about 20% of Islanders were aware of the plebiscite. This is after a year. Fewer than that were aware of the electoral options or what proportional representation is.

A plebiscite or referendum is not an efficient way of deciding this issue, or probably any issue. We didn't bring in the vote for women or the Charter of Rights with a referendum. In Switzerland, which decides many things by referendum, it took two referendums to finally gain women the right to vote in the early 1970s, decades after other western European countries. Only two of the over 90 countries that have PR have implemented it through a referendum or plebiscite: New Zealand and Switzerland. Ultimately, a referendum or plebiscite may simply be a way to thwart an idea whose time has come: if a citizen has a right to vote, they have a right to have that vote count or matter.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you.

I'd now ask Ms. Mary Cowper-Smith to speak.

Ms. Mary Cowper-Smith (As an Individual): I would like to speak in support of proportional representation. I am here on behalf of my two little granddaughters and in fact all the children and youth of Canada who I hope will inherit from us a better voting system than we currently have.

I have voted in every federal and provincial election since I was old enough to vote, and almost every time I either felt my vote was wasted or I felt compelled to vote strategically. As a voter, I have felt frustrated and cheated.

Clearly, proportional representation would eliminate both of these issues. Citizens would not feel forced to vote for any party or candidate who was not their first choice, and every vote would count. The distribution of seats in the House would represent the will of the voters—all the voters—across the country. Very likely, more people would exercise their right and responsibility to vote, knowing that their vote would make a difference.

Under a system of proportional representation, the co-operation necessary among parties to pass legislation would result in laws that would be more representative of the true majority of Canadians. Such legislation would also be less likely to be reversed by the next government. There would be more women, more visible minorities, more indigenous people, if voters could influence the outcome of more than one seat. Parties would nominate a more representative range of candidates to attract the votes of the diverse population of Canada.

Canada is far behind other democracies in electoral reform. It is time for us to choose a voting system that is fair and that gives voters an opportunity to elect a Parliament that is truly representative of their views.

Canadians are fortunate to live in a country that is safe and egalitarian. We can make it even better—more just, more inclusive, more progressive—by adopting a system of proportional representation.

● (1645)

The Chair: Thank you.

Go ahead, Ms. Poirier.

Ms. Sylvia Poirier (As an Individual): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I'd like to welcome your committee here. We were afraid that decisions might be decreed from the middle of the country, so we're very happy that you're visiting P.E.I.

My comments are few and simple. I ask that you invite the people of Canada to vote on this very important issue.

In P.E.I., as you've heard, we have a plebiscite. We were hoping for a referendum. There is a number of issues with the plebiscite. The complexity of the questions is daunting. We all know that in order to get good results, a research question, which this is in fact, has to be clear, and the questions are not clear. In addition, it is a preferential ballot, which I think will provide the opportunity for many spoiled ballots.

In closing, thank you for coming to the birthplace of Confederation, and I ask that all Canadians be allowed to exercise their democratic vote.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you.

Ms. Shaw, go ahead.

Ms. Judy Shaw (As an Individual): My name is Judy Shaw. I was not born in Prince Edward Island, but I retired here to my family's farm in St. Catherines, Prince Edward Island. Prior to that, I worked for a large agri-business in Canada and in Switzerland, for 34 years. That's where my comments come from.

I also want to thank you very much for the opportunity to speak here, and also for the fact that you are present in Prince Edward Island, the most beautiful province in Canada.

My comments are limited to one aspect; that is, the great importance of how we vote and what changes can be made. For this reason, I believe it should be taken to the people by either a referendum or a plebiscite.

I was here all afternoon, and one of the things that didn't come out this afternoon was the fact that the people around your committee, as well as Mr. Russell and Mr. Brown, had the opportunity to come into a committee and learn a great deal from the discussions you had around the table. Please don't take that away from the people. Only through a referendum or a plebiscite could that happen.

With all due respect, I would consider it incredibly arrogant for a committee, which had the opportunity to have this discussion, to take it away from the people.

That's all I have to say, and thank you very much.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Go ahead, Ms. Dingwell.

Ms. Donna Dingwell (As an Individual): Thank you.

I just want to say thank you to the committee. I realized this afternoon that this committee is actually formed with the PR system, which is awesome. That's what Canada wants: a PR system put in place.

I actually sit on the P.E.I. Federation of Labour and was asked to come and speak on behalf of the Canadian Labour Congress. I also sit on the coalition for PR and have learned so much in the last year about our election system. I am going to read just a few notes, since it's only two minutes.

CLC's slogan is “Proportional Representation. It's not complicated. It's just fair.” Canadians have an opportunity to choose a new way of deciding how their votes count and how elections shape future governments. It's an opportunity to choose new election rules that make voting matter so that more people feel it's important to participate. New rules let people see their vote still counts, even if the candidate or party they vote for doesn't win.

The simplest way to achieve this is for Canada to choose new rules like those used by most other countries. Some of the biggest modern democracies in the world have rules based on PR. As we know, times have changed. Not only do we all get to vote today; most of us vote for the political party we want to win far more often than we vote for any individual person, although that's still important.

When there were just two political parties, things still worked out, but today Canada's politics are more diverse, and first past the post isn't able to reflect that reality. Because local votes aren't reflected in the results, people feel their votes are wasted and stop participating. Studies of elections in countries that still use first past the post also show that fewer women and candidates from minority backgrounds are elected.

When we are talking about diversity, with Canada being multicultural, we really need to have more minorities and a more diverse section of MPs in our House.

● (1650)

The Chair: Do you feel proportional representation achieves that best?

Ms. Donna Dingwell: Yes, I do. Specifically, MMP would be the simplest way for Canada to move forward.

The Chair: Thank you. Unfortunately, time is up, but you've made your point, for sure.

Go ahead, Mr. Newman.

Mr. Lewis Newman (As an Individual): Mr. Chairman and distinguished committee members, I will confine my remarks to the public education campaign to precede a plebiscite.

When you recommend to the Parliament of Canada how to do this, please do not follow P.E.I.'s example. We have been kept in the dark. I called the chief electoral office in P.E.I. about a week ago, and I was told that there would be a mailing to every household in October. Voting starts October 29. There is really no time for public discussion or discussion among our friends. I think a lot of people, like me, are perfectly ignorant of the nuances of mixed member proportional representation and dual-member proportional representation. The only one of these five that I understand is first past the post, which is the only one I've ever seen. I understand it, and I fear that this is the one that P.E.I. is going to pick on its plebiscite, because we are ignorant of the other methods. Whether this is planned by the establishment or accidental I don't know, but we are certainly very much in the dark at the present time about these methods.

Our media has let us down badly. There has never been a good discussion that I know of in any of the media about what these different methods mean. I am very disappointed about that, and I am very disappointed about our government not letting us have an opportunity to learn about the other methods. This is really not a fair plebiscite, so far as I am concerned, I really think it should be postponed for about six months, but that's not going to happen.

Anyway, that's all I have to say.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Newman.

Go ahead, Ms. Lanthier.

Ms. Darcie Lanthier (As an Individual): I'm Darcie Lanthier.

I would commend, first of all, the Liberals and even Justin Trudeau. I was a very good Liberal for a long time, but my member of Parliament is Lawrence MacAulay, the member for Cardigan, so you can understand why I'm no longer a really good Liberal.

But Justin Trudeau did in fact tell us that this would be the last unfair election; 2015 as the last unfair election, that was a promise. We were also told that every vote would count. We cannot just tinker with the system a tiny bit and have the result of every vote counting. My favourite is DMP.

Last October, we changed a strong, stable Conservative 39.6% majority for a Liberal landslide of 39.5%. We have a 39.5% majority in Canada, a 40.8% majority in P.E.I., 42.5% in New Brunswick, 45.7% in Nova Scotia, 38.6% in Ontario, 40.6% in Alberta, 41.5% in Quebec, and 44.1% in B.C. Does this sound like a system that's working for everybody? I don't think so. It's not working for me.

I've been out knocking on doors and, to a person, what young people say is, “I don't vote and I don't vote because the system doesn't work; I don't believe in this system.” I'm trying to get them to come out to vote to change the system. There's some movement there, I'm hoping. We can only hope.

I went to every single hearing on Prince Edward Island from our local committee, which doesn't have the courage to actually make a decision but who is putting it out like this in the ballot. A young person listened to everything that was said and stood up at the very end and said, “I didn't choose the system that we're using now. Why don't you change it to something better? Let's try that out for a couple of elections, and then if you want to change it, have a plebiscite and we'll know what we're voting on.”

If you think you can do a better job, it's your job to do it. That's why we voted for you. More than 60% of us voted for a party that favours electoral reform and proportional representation. It's your job to get on with it. I sure hope you do.

● (1655)

The Chair: Thank you.

We'll go with Mr. Underhay.

Mr. Josh Underhay (As an Individual): Good day. I just want to say welcome to P.E.I. It's very 1864, delegates from Upper and Lower Canada coming down to Charlottetown. It's awesome. It's perfect. It's very apt that you guys are here, so welcome, everybody.

I just wanted to echo some of the other people who are here supporting proportional representation.

John Nater, you had a concern earlier regarding the districts and the fact that some of the members would be list members and some of them would be representing a district. One of the options not on the literature that the panel is studying but that we are looking at in P.E.I. is the dual-member system. It's pretty interesting because the solution I think to the concern you were discussing is actually to combine the districts. In P.E.I., for example, we'd be guaranteed four. Therefore, if we ended up with two districts of two each, that would be four. We wouldn't have to double the number of MPs across the country. We could keep the number of MPs relatively the same.

By combining the districts you have a couple of advantages. You're alleviating the concern of list members who aren't accountable to a particular region, so you take care of the concern about lists. You get more collaboration between parties—I think that Marie Burge was mentioning that earlier—so you get more collaboration, people working together. It also still offers regional representation.

To one of the other concerns, regarding stability over time, essentially in our current system we have these massive shifts. You have a blue majority and then you have a red majority and you have these huge shifts. Proponents for the first-past-the-post system like to say that it's more stable and that minority governments don't work. But as Darcie mentioned about the total number of votes representing the people, it would actually be stable over time. If you had a minority government system representing, say, 10% Greens, 20% NDP, and so on, representing what the people believe, the next election wouldn't shift very much, and the election after that wouldn't shift very much. Over time, you would have a stable representation in those minority governments, which can work and works in many countries.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thanks very much.

Finally, we have Mr. Cheverie, please.

Mr. Leo Cheverie (As an Individual): Thank you.

I'm Leo Cheverie. I'm a member of a number of groups, but I am a member of CUPE P.E.I. and represent CUPE P.E.I. in the PR coalition. CUPE national, Canada's largest union, has also endorsed proportional representation as an electoral model that they are supporting.

I want to talk very quickly about a bit of history because I think it's really important. I know when P.E.I.'s legislature formed, it was white, propertied, Protestant males who composed the legislature. By 1864, when we actually had all the fathers get together—I've never been a father, but I've played one—for Confederation, there still wasn't a very inclusive system in terms of women and other groups. We could go through the whole history here. Even on P.E.I., we had to go to a Charter of Rights challenge to actually have single-member ridings that reflected the population more accurately in our legislature.

I also want to tell you one little story. I know this came out later on, but I know that Prime Minister Trudeau's father Pierre Elliott Trudeau approached the NDP caucus when Broadbent was leader to suggest we should have PR, and asked for their support. It didn't happen at that point in time.

They did it because they wanted a Canada that was more representative, so that in actual fact, with people elected MPs across the country, you would have Liberals in Alberta, you would have Conservatives or other under-represented parties in Quebec. Part of that was a vision, recognizing that we need a system that better represents all the people across the country. That's why he proposed it.

I think we have to remember that as well. I also think that in terms of MMP and a plebiscite referendum, Brenda spoke very well about what happened in the only two countries that voted, Switzerland and New Zealand.

I also met Darren Hughes, who's a part of the Electoral Reform Society in London, U.K., and he is a former parliamentarian from New Zealand. He said the circumstances there were unique in terms of how that came about because they actually elected governments that had fewer votes than the other parties. He would not recommend a referendum or a plebiscite. He said that's not the way to go in terms of moving forward, and he talked about New Zealand's example being unique in terms of why that came about at that point in time. So, I don't think that is the way to go.

Also, in terms of healthy collaboration and the democracy that we have—both Josh and Marie spoke about it—we actually have to change the nature of politics, to make it more inclusive, to include more voices, but also how it's done in terms of people coming together and trying to solve problems together, whether it be climate change or whatever. Extreme polarization does not help in a healthy democracy and actually turns voters off.

Look at younger voters who are looking at what's happening. We're trying to encourage people to be more involved, and I know there are many examples around the world. For example, there's lots of movement towards participatory budget-making, where people get involved in helping to determine the budget as opposed to—

● (1700)

The Chair: Sir, could you just slow down a bit, because our interpreters can't keep up.

Mr. Leo Cheverie: I'm sorry. Yes. I agree.

The Chair: In any event, we are over time. Maybe you could do a short wrap-up, but slowly.

Mr. Leo Cheverie: A very deep democracy means getting people more engaged and more involved, and feeling that their voices are heard. When voices aren't heard or when, for example, people are elected with 38% or 39% of the vote and get 100% of the power, it negates people's voices and their ability to play a role.

I know around the world there's a thing called participatory budget processes that happen in terms of people coming together and helping to decide what the budget could be, as opposed to, say, omnibus budget bills, for example.

All I'm saying is let's move forward. Most countries have it.

The Chair: Our time is up. Thank you very much.

Thank you to everyone, in fact, for your points of view, and as I said earlier, for the frank discussion that we've had. We really appreciate it. It has been a great day in Charlottetown, and we look forward to a good evening session.

The committee is going to break for about an hour, and we'll back at six for a third panel and another open-mike segment.

● (1700)

(Pause)

● (1810)

The Chair: Welcome back, colleagues.

I welcome our witnesses for the third panel of our day here in Charlottetown.

This evening we have Anna Keenan, electoral reform advocate; Dawn Wilson, executive director of the PEI Coalition for Women in Government; and Don Desserud from the Department of Political Science of the University of Prince Edward Island, who is appearing tonight as an individual.

Each witness will have five minutes to present, and that will be followed by a round of questioning. Each member of the committee will be able to ask questions or engage the witness for five minutes.

Without further delay, we will ask Ms. Keenan to kick off the session.

Ms. Anna Keenan (As an Individual): Thank you very much to the committee for inviting me to be a witness tonight.

I had three topics that I wished to discuss, but in five minutes I can really only do justice to one. At the end, I'll mention what the other two were, and if you'd like to ask me questions about that, feel free.

I want to speak today about dual-member mixed proportional representation, or DMP, designed by Mr. Sean Graham, who I understand gave you a great rundown of that system in Alberta last week.

First, I'll speak about what I like about DMP and why I decided to advocate for this model as one of the options in the provincial plebiscite coming up, which, obviously, was successful because it is now on the ballot in P.E.I.

Second, I'll speak about my experience of how DMP has been received by the island's public in our work today.

These are the top four things that I like about dual-member proportional and why I think it would be an excellent choice, not only for P.E.I. but also for Canada.

First, it is a strictly proportional system; however, it relies entirely on local district candidates. Open-list MMP and STV agree very well with my personal values, but I do know that any form of a regional list, which is a reality in both MMP and STV, and a two-tier Parliament are two real sticking points for a lot of people. I especially find that true for people who strongly value accountability to local geographic communities. DMP is a proportional system that satisfies that criteria.

Second, DMP demonstrates diversity within small geographic areas. You've heard a number of times today that it's just not right that the Conservative Party has been entirely shut out of the Atlantic provinces despite having 40% of the vote here federally. Likewise, looking at the first-past-the-post map of Canada, the U.S., my home country of Australia in the lower house, and the U.K., you would get the impression that everybody in this region votes red, and everybody in that region votes blue, and there's no showing of the diversity of both communities.

In my few short years that I've lived in this country—I have been here for three years, in Montreal for two and P.E.I. for one and a half—I've learned that Canadians strongly value diversity, and the electoral system here should reflect that, not only across the whole country but also within the communities that we elect our representatives in.

In dual-member proportional, diversity is visible in a very small geographic area, not only in the large regions. In DMP, each local riding would be represented by two candidates who are likely going to be from two different parties. What this means is that many more voters are locally satisfied than in the current system.

The other two points that I like about dual-member proportional, very briefly—there's a long list, but these are my top four—are that DMP allows for the theoretical possibility of a legislature that is composed entirely of independent candidates. I don't know of any other proportional system that allows for that possibility. I think we're probably 50 or 100 years off that, but I think it's an interesting theoretical feature of the system. Finally, it has an extremely simple ballot for a proportional system; you mark a single *X*.

My second point is how DMP is being received by the public in P.E.I.

Through my work as the founder of the PR action team and also now as an employee of the P.E.I. PR Coalition, I have personally spoken with hundreds of people one-on-one across the island, on the street and at their doors, about the upcoming provincial vote. I'm very happy to report that most people who prefer proportional representation are not fussy about which model they want. Where it gets interesting is speaking with people who don't object to the principle of proportionality but who are uncomfortable with some of the specifics of one of the proportional models.

As an example, I will share some words, which are available on the public record, from Sidney MacEwen and Brad Trivers, who are both Progressive Conservative MLAs here on the island. Both of them have expressed publicly that they are in favour of either dual-member proportional or first past the post in the upcoming plebiscite, but not mixed member proportional. Why is this?

In a recent CBC article, Mr. MacEwen was quoted as saying:

> First and foremost, the MLA gets elected on a district level...The MLA or the MP must be responsible to its constituents...Before I got into politics, I might have thought maybe a mixed-member proportional system might be OK. Now when I look at it, it creates two tiers of MLAs where you're not directly accountable to a constituency, so in the next election you don't have to go back to the doors and answer for the decisions you made in the house.

● (1815)

You can agree with that or not, and I personally would argue with some of those points. I'm quite a fan of MMP personally, but I know there are some people, like Mr. MacEwen, who just can't square their specific values with that particular model, because their values are so strongly rooted in local communities.

I'd like to suggest that DMP offers a way for people who share those values regarding local community accountability to feel comfortable supporting a proportional representation model.

I'll leave it at those initial points. I truly think that DMP could be a model that could gather majority support or perhaps even consensus support from this committee. I'm happy to answer questions on the technical details or the values behind DMP, as well as on two other topics. One is the question of a referendum on Canada and why I— acting as one of the campaign directors for the P.E.I. plebiscite campaign— think it would be a terrible idea. I'm also happy to answer questions about features of the electoral system of Australia, the country of my citizenship, regarding things such as majoritarian preferential voting, mandatory voting, or STV in the Australian Senate.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you very much for the clarity of that presentation.

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

Ms. Dawn Wilson (Executive Director, PEI Coalition for Women in Government): Thank you.

The PEI Coalition for Women in Government thanks the special committee for the opportunity to appear here this evening as a witness. It's particularly meaningful to appear on this topic during Women's History Month.

For some context, the PEI Coalition for Women in Government is a multi-partisan coalition of individuals and organizations that works to advance opportunities for women to be elected to all levels of government here in P.E.I. It's important to note that the coalition has a long history of participating in electoral reform, specifically proportional representation at the provincial level here. The focus of our submission is specifically on the opportunity for greater accessibility and inclusiveness of women in under-represented groups within electoral systems.

We know that women make up more than half of the Canadian and island population but are under-represented at both levels of government. Despite more women than ever before being elected to the House of Commons in 2015, the percentage of women MPs is 26%. Without any changes to the current system, it will take approximately 90 years to reach gender parity at the federal level. The numbers are even more concerning provincially, where women make up just 14.8% of members of the legislative assembly here in Prince Edward Island. Women can only make a substantial difference to the political discourse when they are present in more than token numbers, according to the United Nations, which has identified the critical mass of women in government as 33%, or one third.

History and examples show that the number of women in government will not rise naturally on its own. A concerted and sustained effort is needed to increase the number of women elected and includes a combination of approaches that also address structural and systemic barriers, which includes the electoral system.

The biggest barrier we have found to electing women lies with getting women's names on the ballot in the first place. Political parties provincially and federally are simply not nominating women at high enough numbers to make substantial change. There's also significant variation between parties in number of women candidates. Historically, smaller parties have nominated more women; however, this has not translated into electing more women within the current system.

While our work has always focused on collaborating with individual women and political parties, it has always remained clear that the whole electoral system requires a significant overhaul to ensure a truly representative democracy in which elected representatives reflect the diversity of the population.

When we look at democracies with the most balanced proportion of women, we find that most of these have some form of proportional representation. Almost all of the top countries outlined by the Inter-Parliamentary Union use some form of proportional representation.

Proportional electoral systems contribute to the election of more women because there's more diversity among parties elected. Under some proportional systems, parties are responsible for developing a candidate list, either closed or open. In these cases, parties are more likely to look at the list holistically in terms of gender, diversity, and perhaps geography, a balance between those identities, and a contagion effect is more likely within proportional systems. Contagion is a process by which parties adopt policies or practices initiated by other political parties. Proportional electoral systems are more likely to include smaller parties with more diverse candidate lists, which inspire other parties, then, to ensure their lists are also representative of the population. This would be true of P.E.I. and Canada, where smaller parties have historically nominated more women candidates than larger, more dominant parties.

According to research by political scientist Arend Lijphart, proportional representation has a positive impact on the number of women elected to government. For instance, he found that countries using proportional systems elected 8% more women to Parliament than majoritarian systems. In comparison to the recent federal election, where we saw a small 1% increase in the number of women elected to the House of Commons, an 8% jump in the number of women elected would bring Canada much closer to gender parity.

When we look at democracies with the most balanced proportion of women, we find that most of these have some form of proportional representation. Canada has a unique opportunity to develop a new proportional electoral system designed with a gender and diversity lens to best meet the needs of our increasingly diverse population.

In closing, we would like to thank you for this opportunity to provide input into your process and we look forward to the outcome.

Thank you.

● (1820)

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Wilson.

Professor Desserud, for five minutes, please.

Mr. Don Desserud (Professor, Department of Political Science, University of Prince Edward Island, As an Individual): Thank you very much.

I should start by saying that I may be here under false pretenses, because I'm going to speak to you about mandatory voting. I do not claim to be an expert on mandatory voting. I am an expert on Senate reform and the historical origins of its residence requirement, and I can speak about that at great length if you'd like.

The Chair: It might come up in question period

Mr. Don Desserud: I am interested in the question of civic engagement, and mandatory voting connects with that very well. It also connects very well with the discussions you're having over electoral reform because I would argue that at least one of the purposes of electoral reform is to try to improve civic engagement among Canadians, the theory being that the current system is not conducive to many Canadians believing that their vote counts or that they have a voice.

What is mandatory voting and why is it being considered? The theory, as best I can understand, is that voting is more than a right, it's also a duty, and that people sometimes need a bit of a nudge in order to be convinced to perform that duty. The general claim is that in systems like ours there is a disproportion, or a skew if you like, in the population who are voting in any one election. Older people vote more than younger people do. Better-educated people vote more than people with less education. Wealthier people vote more than people who are not so wealthy. As a consequence then we have a political system that tends to favour those groups at the disadvantage of the groups that are not voting.

The theory continues that if you make voting a duty that is mandatory, that is enough of a nudge or incentive for the groups that are not voting now to get out and vote, and that this would provide a better socio-economic voting distribution among the public.

I'll let Anna speak about this if she likes, but systems that do use mandatory voting like Australia do not have an onerous penalty. It's around $20 if you don't vote, and there are ways in which you can explain why you were not there. It's not like it's a major problem.

Some of the comparisons that are made are between mandatory voting and things like seat belt legislation. There was a great public campaign for us to all wear seat belts. I remember that growing up, but we didn't wear them until they made it mandatory, and now we do. If you ask people what is the fine for not wearing a seat belt, I'd be willing to bet most people don't even know. They just accept it as something that we're supposed to do. That seems all very well.

However, having said all that, I'm not in favour of mandatory voting and I'm hoping that the committee will not recommend such a system. My concern is that we're missing the point. Yes, voting is a civic duty and is itself a form of civic engagement, but it's also a measure, a reflection of the engagement of the community. In other words, people are not voting for other reasons than simply because they haven't been nudged, and if we have mandatory voting we risk overlooking those or masking those. So I'm going to suggest some reasons why I think people are not voting, and why voting turnout is going down.

It's kind of ironic to be talking about this in Prince Edward Island, by the way, because we regularly have the highest voting turnouts at provincial elections in the country. In the mid-80% is normal. But I would suggest to you that people don't vote because they have come over time to see elections as not making a whole lot of difference. In other words, they see the results as being little different from what they were before or they don't see that the choices are valid to them, or they don't think that their vote counts. A substantial number of people have been turned off by the electoral system.

The conclusion I have then is that if this committee is going to be looking at electoral reform, what I'm hoping they will do is keep clearly in mind the question of civic engagement because I think that should be the main goal in whatever improvements you are able to recommend or any improvement that you want to make.

Thank you very much.

● (1825)

The Chair: Thank you very much, Professor.

We'll go to a round of questioning now, starting with Mr. Aldag.

Mr. John Aldag: Great, thank you.

I'd like to thank our witnesses for being here this evening, and the members of the audience who have joined us. I look forward to your comments once we wrap up this panel.

I'm going to start with Ms. Keenan. We talk about referenda a lot in this committee. I have not taken a position nor has our government but when somebody comes up with a strong position either for or against it's always interesting to explore it. In your case you left me hanging a bit on it being a terrible idea. Why do you think that? I have to go there.

Ms. Anna Keenan: I suppose the best answer to this is to think about who I am and who you have heard present to you from the P.E.I. Coalition for PR today.

I'm personally a climate change and renewable energy expert. I've spent 10 years working on this issue. For the last year, I've diverted all of my effort and energy from working on that issue to working on this issue. Likewise, people from the Coalition for Women in Government, the Status of Women organization, Council of People with Disabilities, Federation of Labour, CUPE, all of these organizations, and the Cooper Institute, trying to advance social justice, environmental sustainability, really trying to advance these issues.

All of us in the coalition feel, in common, that the current first-past-the-post electoral system is a barrier to progress on all of those issues, so we are willing to put aside our time that we should be spending pushing each of those issues forward, trying to fix this broken system. If a referendum is called, federally, what will happen nationally is the same thing that has happened here, where I've now spent literally a year of my time—I have a nine-month-old son—but aside from that, all of my time has gone into this campaign.

I don't know if we're going to succeed or not. There are so many factors at play. We are working so hard. We have volunteers going door to door who have made things like this, taking photos of people, explaining the difference between what we voted for and what we got, at people's doors. We're a very under-resourced group, but it is taking so much time from progressing these other issues.

If you want to call for a referendum in Canada, I want you all to know that you would be setting back social justice progress by a huge amount. You have the capacity to simply make a decision in this committee and that would free up the resources of all.... It's not only the financial costs to the taxpayers, it is the time cost of the advocates who would need to be running the campaigns, to educate people across the country.

I feel very strongly about that.

● (1830)

Mr. John Aldag: I would say both, those wanting to educate and...there would be a group that would mobilize to oppose.

Really quickly, Professor Desserud, you mentioned key civic engagement. We've heard things like getting back into the schools. As a federal body, we have limited ability to influence provincial curricula. What are the things we can do on the civic engagement piece, your top one or two ideas?

Mr. Don Desserud: I appreciate the federal-provincial division of powers problem here, but education in schools is absolutely essential. It has been dropped by most school curriculums across the country. I went to high school in 1971 to 1974 and by the time I got there, the political science courses were gone. They've been gone for a long time. I would start with that.

I think the federal government can play a role in advocating for that, and working with ministers at the provincial level to encourage them and provide incentives, perhaps, as well. That would be the one that I would think is absolutely crucial.

Mr. John Aldag: Is there a second idea on how we get citizens engaged in this awareness?

Mr. Don Desserud: I think the second idea is to come up with a fantastically brilliant proposal from this committee on how to reform the electoral system.

But seriously, I do think that's the main problem. Obviously not everyone, but a substantial number of people have lost confidence in the system as being meaningful in their own participation. I'm fundamentally neutral on the different options that are available. I think they're all very interesting in different ways. They seek to solve different problems. That's one of the reasons why people are advocating for preferential ballots, for example, versus proportional representation, or a mixed member system and so forth. They have a different idea of what they want to see.

They all have some good things, and they all have some drawbacks. At least, if it was seen that things were changing in a way that people thought when they cast their ballot it would make a difference, and I think they don't now, that would be the way in which they would want to get more engaged in the system.

The Chair: Mr. Reid, please.

● (1835)

Mr. Scott Reid: Looking at TPP, we had the Alberta Sean Graham, not the New Brunswick one, talk to this committee about a week ago. He outlined the system. He was very compelling, but at the same time, there were some things I wasn't able to get out of the questions to him that I'd like to ask you because you are clearly very familiar with how the system would work.

As I understand it, you take all the ridings in Canada, you pair them; neighbouring ridings and some sort of expedited redistribution could do that. Each riding now has two candidates running. You cast a single ballot, but when you do so presumably you're aware of the fact that candidate A for the Green Party has, in some sort of internal party selection process, been put ahead of candidate B. Assuming the Green Party wins that particular seat—let's say it's Elizabeth's riding and Victoria—you get those two ridings. I'm going to guess that she would be the top of the candidates. Assuming they win, she's now the MP for that riding. In some way that I haven't quite got my head around, all the other pool of people who were not the first-place candidates in their ridings become the people from whom some kind of list is populated.

How do you now choose among those other people who did not win in their ridings? Can you help me on that?

Ms. Anna Keenan: Sure. I want to clarify that in Sean Graham's models and also the models that I've done for P.E.I. for the last six elections for the MP, pairing his neighbouring riding would be a convenient way to manage the data, but in practice it wouldn't be a prudent thing to have a boundary commission look at redrawing the boundaries rather than just pairing them because then you might end up with some quite strange riding shapes. But yes, you're correct. There's a single ballot, and we're using the primary candidate and the secondary candidate in every riding. To use Elizabeth's riding, if Elizabeth were elected as the primary candidate for an adjoined riding, then the secondary Green candidate who was not elected would be considered for the second seat in that riding, along with the first candidates from the other parties or any independents who ran in that district.

That is the list of candidates who have potential to be elected to the second seat in that district. The second seat allocation works by having the proportional calculation for the region as a whole calculated. The first seat's subtracted and which parties are due the remainder of the seats, then the aim is to award each party their deserved seats in the places where they have the strongest relative support.

In P.E.I. it would be a common situation when the NDP or the Greens did not win any of the first list seats, but they had their strongest performance in one particular area. It would try to allocate the NDP seats for their top candidates as the second candidate in that riding.

Mr. Scott Reid: Is this not simply a version of the system used in Baden-Württemberg, the best loser system where effectively you populate your party list from the people who were the top, the non-winning—-

Ms. Anna Keenan: The best runner-up, yes.

It is similar to that system, but I have not looked into the Baden-Württemberg system in enough detail to be able to pull out the similarities.

Mr. Scott Reid: What struck me as problematic about that system, although in many respects I think it may be a very good system—I'm a fan of Baden-Württemberg, not TPP—is that you would tend to have the best runners-up coming from the areas where the party is the strongest. You might exaggerate the geographical concentration of parties. To give a good example from this committee, what percentage of the vote did you take, 70%?

Mr. Blake Richards: The new riding's different but in the previous riding it would have been over that, yes.

Mr. Scott Reid: Yes, so the 70%, 80% range. Your second runner-up would tend to come from ridings like that because the Conservatives are already overrepresented in Alberta and under-represented in Atlantic Canada. There is a national list, but you can see the point I'm getting at. Rural Alberta will produce more results for the Conservative Party because it's already stronger there. I'm worried about that geographical issue. You may have resolved it with TPP, I don't know.

Ms. Anna Keenan: There is a chance in TPP that if a party has extremely strong local support on the order of 70% and 80%, it would be quite likely that with numbers like that, both candidates from that party would be elected because the second candidate from that party is still considered among the runners-up and this might be the differentiating factor between this and Baden-Württemberg.

The secondary candidate from that party is considered along with the first candidates from the parties that did not win the first seats. The secondary candidate is allocated 50% of the votes that were won by that party overall. I can only recommend that people read Sean Graham's 80-page report in detail, and have a look at the simulation.

● (1840)

Mr. Scott Reid: There are also some videos I noticed. The *Edmonton Journal* has a link to one and a separate one has been put up for the P.E.I. electoral commission.

Ms. Anna Keenan: There's also one that I created back in February before the P.E.I. electoral commission, which I did with my father-in-law narrating it. It's the DMP explained in under two minutes. So have a look at that.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

We'll go to Mr. MacGregor.

Mr. Alistair MacGregor: Thank you very much to all three of you for appearing before the committee today.

I'll start with Ms. Keenan with just a few more questions about the DMP. Essentially, we would see Canada's 338 seats go down to 169 electoral districts, so we would keep the same seat count that we currently have in the House of Commons.

Ms. Anna Keenan: Yes.

Mr. Alistair MacGregor: If you take a riding like in northern British Columbia.... My colleague, Mr. Cullen, has a massive riding, Skeena—Bulkley Valley—it's about 325,000 square kilometres—and if you were to pair that with North Island—Powell River, you'd get a riding that is 406,000 square kilometres, so it's massive, with a very diverse set of towns and first nations.

If you are running the DMP system with a riding that's potentially that large, have there been any concerns about accidentally getting two candidates from just one corner of the riding, and not really understanding the region as a whole?

Ms. Anna Keenan: That is a concern that has been raised by one of the people who have shown a lot of interest in the model from Fair Vote Canada. That person has been wanting to learn more about the model and is trying to figure it out and has raised that as a potential concern.

I would say that the same problem currently exists in the first-past-the-post system where you can have a very large riding but you only have one person from one place. The fact that you have twice as large a riding but you have two representatives, you've got more of a chance to have people covered if you have two people from a similar area.

In order to win votes, a smart party in the nomination process would probably consider where it wants to put its candidates to draw the most votes. That is a potential chance, but I wouldn't say that would be a default or common occurrence. I'd like to give the model a chance and see how it runs for a couple of elections, and then make a judgment.

Mr. Alistair MacGregor: Then just switching gears, Professor Desserud was mentioning the subject of mandatory voting and a very interesting point that, if you impose that system it can mask over some of the larger problems that might exist in the system. You've lived in a country that has mandatory voting. I just wanted to hear your personal perspective on it and your thoughts about it.

Ms. Anna Keenan: I loved mandatory voting. I found it shocking that it was optional to vote when I moved to other countries. If it's the norm in the country you're from, it's quite surprising that the majority of countries in the world have it be optional.

The reason that I am a huge fan of mandatory voting is because of the way that it changes campaigning. I had never heard of a “get out the vote” campaign before I left Australia. Rather than a campaign being about why you should come out and vote and risking the appeal to very populist or extreme positions that can attract real fanatics on certain issues to come out and vote, everybody is already going to come out and vote. The campaigning becomes a lot more about the issues and the policies.

I had never seen such personality-based politics, until I really started looking at the U.K., the U.S., and Canada and these places that have the first-past-the-post system with optional voting. In Australia, my experience was always much more campaigning about the issues. I worked on issue-based election campaigns there.

Mr. Alistair MacGregor: Ms. Wilson, when we look at Prince Edward Island and the history of getting women elected, it's not a very glorious history. I think the Liberals and Conservatives have only nominated six women, and half of them actually made it to the legislature.

In addition to electoral reform, what else do you think needs to be done to increase the representation of women? This has been a constant theme, and we've discussed this many times with many witnesses. I'd just love to hear your perspective on that particular issue.

Ms. Dawn Wilson: As you mentioned, there has been quite an under-representation of women in P.E.I.'s history in the context of the legislature here. We've only ever elected 26 women to the legislature, and as I mentioned, we're at 14.8% currently, which places P.E.I. among the lowest in the country in terms of gender equality in elected office.

I'm sure the topic has come up a number of times throughout your presentations. From our perspective, proportional representation would make a significant difference in terms of the number of women elected. However, we know that no electoral system in itself will address all of the barriers and challenges around electing women. Work will still need to be done on behalf of individuals, parties, and voters in order to make sure that happens.

I know that you heard earlier today from other organizations with a gender perspective, and there are voluntary measures, both regulatory and legislative. Based on our research, we know that voluntary measures on their own are less effective at creating significant change over time. Those combined with legislative measures or measures such as changes to the electoral system can be quite successful.

● (1845)

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

Ms. May.

Ms. Elizabeth May: Thank you very much.

Thank you to our panellists here. The event and the quality today in Charlottetown are truly amazing. This is the 16th location in which we have held sessions and it's our 38th meeting, and it's truly a tribute to Prince Edward Islanders that the quality of what we're hearing is so extremely helpful and fresh.

How do you do it?

I want to ask Dawn Wilson a question. One of our colleagues in Parliament, Kennedy Stewart for the New Democrats, has put forward a private member's bill. I don't know if you've seen it. It relates to tying rebates from the federal purse to how many women a party has nominated. You seem to have heard of it.

Do you have any comments on whether this committee should recommend that as part of our report?

Ms. Dawn Wilson: As you know, P.E.I. is approaching a plebiscite on electoral reform. The Coalition for Women in Government, as Anna mentioned, has been a part of the coalition for proportional representation, and through that work we've had an opportunity to present to the provincial special committee a number of times. One of our focuses was on electoral financing and electoral reform. I did review Kennedy Stewart's private member's bill, which does suggest a negative incentive for parties that fail to meet a certain threshold of diversity among candidates.

We also know that the advisory council on the status of women in Quebec has a similar policy.

On the flip side, there are positive incentives as well.

We, as the Coalition for Women in Government, did not take a position on that, but we did provide some information regarding that bill to the Special Committee on Democratic Renewal at the provincial level.

Ms. Elizabeth May: Thank you.

I will turn now to Anna Keenan, and for full disclosure, I will just say that I know Anna very well and I think she's fabulous and I'm so glad she has come to Canada.

I want to zero in on dual-member proportional, because I have to say that when Sean Graham presented to us, I was so impressed. He confidently proclaimed—and it's a bold claim given how complex and how almost infinite in variety the choices in proportional representation are—that his system was perfect.

Have you found any imperfections as you have advocated for it?

Ms. Anna Keenan: This is a sneaky trick question.

I think one of the things that can be hard for people to understand at first is that in most districts, whoever is the most popular party and whoever is the second most popular party will both have their representatives elected in that district, which is great, because it means that many voters are fulfilled. If the winning candidate got 40% of the vote and the second-place candidate got 30% of the vote, then you have 70% of the voters in that district who have the representatives that they voted for, which is a very nice feature.

In dual-member proportional, sometimes it happens—and this is in a minority of districts—that it is the first-place and the third-place candidates, or the first-place and even the fourth-place candidates, who can be elected. You can imagine that that might confuse and upset people in that district, but I think it's understandable because of the provincial balance. If people vote for the second-place candidate in a district, and if that second-place candidate didn't win, then it would be because the party of that second-place candidate was awarded their seats in places where their party did better than in that particular riding, and so the third-place and fourth-place candidates would be the strongest showing for that party across the province.

One of the nice things about dual-member proportional is that the district where that happens changes every election. You wouldn't get one geographic district that is consistently disadvantaged over time. It might be that one riding gets their first-place and third-place candidates this election, but the next election it'll be their first-place and second-place candidates.

In learning about DMP and really looking at the models and studying it, I think that it is by far the strongest system that I've seen. I was spending a number of years working on climate policy in different countries, and I thought to myself, “What would my ideal electoral system look like?” I had a back of the envelope idea. When I was considering my submission to the provincial process, I was thinking that I'd sketch out this idea, but then I read through the other submissions and I found Sean's report. I thought this guy had written exactly what I would have written had I had a two-year period to research, report, develop the system, and test the model mathematically.

I think it's a very robust system. The weaknesses of DMP are very slight compared to the weaknesses of other proportional systems. Every proportional system, every system, has its pluses and minuses, and I think that DMP has the fewest weaknesses.

● (1850)

Ms. Elizabeth May: Thank you. I think I'm out of time.

The Chair: We'll go now to Ms. Romanado.

Mrs. Sherry Romanado: I'd like to thank you all for being here today and for bringing props. We like props, thank you. I think you're the first city that showed us some props.

I have not been challenging, but questioning how to get more women in politics. I absolutely believe we need more women in politics, we need more visible minorities, and we need more aboriginals, and I'm trying to figure out what's the best combination of tactics that we can use, including an alternative voting system.

There is one thing I have not heard. Does anyone know if any research has been done to find out from women who had been asked to run, or had considered running, for the nomination but did not, and why they did not? Do we know if any research exists in this regard?

Mr. Don Desserud: I'm not going to say this with absolute authority, but yes, I believe that there is. You're going to be in Fredericton next, you said?

Mrs. Sherry Romanado: Yes.

Mr. Don Desserud: One of your presenters is going to be Dr. Joanna Everitt. She's a colleague of mine at the University of New Brunswick in Saint John. That's the area that she works in, so she will know. If she's not doing it directly, she will know who is.

I think Sonia Pitrie is the name that you want. I think she has done that work at Laval.

Mrs. Sherry Romanado: Perfect. What I'm trying to do is pinpoint the motivating factors and/or barriers and how we can address each of those barriers. I think it's going to be a combination. The magical solution will be a combination of things that will increase women's participation.

I'm curious to see how many young women run for office. That is a double complexity.

We had, in the last election, and I've spoken to Elizabeth about this, a candidate for the Green Party in the riding next to mine. She turned 18 on the day of the vote. They had to actually verify whether she would be eligible to run, but she ran for federal office. The youngest woman ever, the youngest person ever, to run for federal office was Casandra Poitrasin in Longueuil—St-Hubert, my neighbouring riding. Kudos to her for having the chutzpah to do this.

I think it's a double challenge: getting youth engaged not just in terms of voting but in terms of wanting to run for office.

We've heard some other testimony—I love using this, because people give me dirty looks—about male, stale, pale candidates and MPs. I had to throw it in there, John.

Anyway, we've heard this. How can we get a little more diversity in the House? Is there any advice you would have on how we engage? We might use the same method, the same tactics, we use to engage women to run for office to get younger folks and visible minorities, those with disabilities, and aboriginals to decide to run for office. Do you have some points on that? Then I want to talk about mandatory voting.

● (1855)

Ms. Dawn Wilson: I would also offer that in 2009, the Coalition for Women in Government undertook a study. One of the biggest reasons we had heard from women as to why they decided not to run was a concern about work-life balance. So in 2009, we undertook some national research that compared the work-life balance of MLAs across the country to P.E.I. We found that constituents in P.E.I. had very high expectations of MLAs. MLAs worked very, very hard. What we found was that when you looked at the statistics, women across all sectors were doing more work in the home, in addition to their paid employment.

It wasn't specific to women in government. It was just getting that messaging out there. In addition to that, we put forward 17 recommendations to government and political parties here in P.E.I. I'd be happy to share that research with you.

One of the things we found was that we've inherited electoral systems, parliamentary structures, that were developed at a time when women were not considered persons under the law and did not have the right to vote. It's not surprising, then, that these systems have failed to meet the needs of women or the realities of women's lives. In fact, they need some modernization to meet those needs.

I say that with the knowledge that men also benefit from many of these recommendations and chances as well.

Mrs. Sherry Romanado: I know that one of the big factors we've heard, and you said it, is work-life balance.

I'm curious to see how many women who live in remote ridings, for instance, B.C..... My colleague Nathan flies, and it takes him forever to get to Ottawa and back.

It is not just women. How many folks determine that the time travelling to Ottawa is an impediment? Everyone can make more money; we can't make more time. Folks don't want to spend their lives in a plane. If something happens at home, and they need to get home quickly, it's a real problem. Halloweens are missed, birthdays, the first time sitting up, and all of that fun jazz. That has an impact.

I'm curious about whether there's been any research on remote areas compared to Ottawa and how hard it is to recruit people. Is there a correlation there?

Ms. Dawn Wilson: Our research is mostly focused on the context of P.E.I., but I know that our friends at Equal Voice who have that federal focus have put forward some recommendations for modernizing systems to better meet those needs. I can't say for sure that it would adjust because of the remote and rural.

Mrs. Sherry Romanado: Perfect. Thank you.

I'm just going to ask a quick question on mandatory voting. I love the fact that we're now looking at it and instead of just saying that it's a participation issue, we're saying that parties would have to focus on issues rather than on getting out the vote. It's really changing the way we do politics, because often during the campaign, especially at the beginning of the campaign, or even before the campaign has started, some people say, “Where's the beef? Where do you stand on this? Where do you stand on that?” That's what people want to know. They don't want to wait until it's drawn out. They want to know where you stand on specific issues.

What are your thoughts on that?

The Chair: Briefly, please.

Mr. Don Desserud: If that's what happens...and I'm not convinced that it will. I think there's a difference between Australian political culture and Canadian political culture that may explain the Australian example. It may not be because of the mandatory voting. We have a correlation, not a causal relationship.

I don't know the answer, but I don't see the evidence yet.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Richards.

Mr. Blake Richards: A lot of the different things we've discussed quite frequently we've now heard your comments on. I appreciate that. I have a couple of questions.

First, there's one thing that I don't think we've heard any discussion on; if we have, I haven't caught it. It's about the mandate, I guess, that was in the Liberal platform. One of the other things besides proportional representation or mandatory voting, which we've discussed, and I think online voting has been mentioned a couple of times as well, was the idea of a preferential ballot as one option that would be considered.

I don't think I heard any of you comment on whether that would be an appropriate system or type of voting. I'd like to hear your thoughts on preferential ballot and whether you think that would be a positive change, whether it would be a negative change, or whether you're indifferent towards it.

I'll start with whoever wants to start.

● (1900)

Ms. Anna Keenan: I'll jump into this one.

The lower house in Australia uses preferential voting. I think the important thing to remember about preferential voting, from my perspective, is that, sure, it feels better to the voter when you cast your vote, because you don't have to vote strategically. But that is the only problem that preferential voting solves compared with first past the post with just a single X. You don't have to vote strategically. You can list the parties in your order of preference, and it's an accurate representation of a voter's wishes.

In the Australian experience, it does consistently lead to people who can go their whole lives with their first-preference vote never counting. It creates voter inequality between different voters. Some voters have their first-preference vote count and some voters only have their second- or third- or fourth-preference vote actually count.

I think the inequality it creates between voters is unfair. It's still a winner-take-all system. There are winners and losers. It turns some voters into winners, “Oh, great, my candidate got elected.” Some voters, however, just have to suck it up, “Hey, the person I wanted didn't get elected.” With proportional representation, everybody's first-preference vote counts equally.

I think preferential voting should be off the card. The five values of this committee point very strongly toward proportional representation. Let's make this discussion about which model of proportional representation you're looking at.

Mr. Blake Richards: Does anyone else have a comment on it?

Don.

Mr. Don Desserud: Without disagreeing with Anna, there is one other advantage. That is, we live in a conservative country in terms of our understanding of our electoral systems. We're reluctant to change. We've seen initiatives in other provinces fail, such as in British Columbia; there's here in Prince Edward Island; in New Brunswick it just went onto a shelf and didn't go anywhere. I actually worked on that commission.

One of the reasons is that the changes being proposed tend to be seen as very complicated and hard to understand. The one thing about a preferential ballot—I don't know that it mitigates what Anna said, but at least it has this value—is that people get it. If it were the case that a changed system adopting a preferential ballot happened, and people saw that the change was not so scary after all, then I think the next step of going to the more radical change would be a lot easier than to jump from where we are now to the radical change.

So it's at least that. It does not change, in any substantial way, the distribution of parties in the assemblies, which becomes a huge problem for people particularly supporting proportional representation, but it's at least a change that people can understand and are probably more willing to accept.

Mr. Blake Richards: Okay.

Ms. Wilson, do you have comments on a preferential ballot?

Ms. Dawn Wilson: About the preferential ballot, we did recommend to the Special Committee on Democratic Renewal when we presented last October that regardless of any of the systems put forward, a gender and diversity lens should be applied to all of them to see how they would meet the needs of women and diverse groups. That's all I really have to say around the preferential ballot.

Mr. Blake Richards: Okay.

Professor Desserud, I want to get your comments, as a political scientist, on the process that's been undertaken here. Is there anything we should be doing to improve the process as we move forward on these consultations and make the kinds of decisions we'll be making?

Mr. Don Desserud: I don't dare say you should have a referendum on it, with the comments on that. No, I'm joking.

The idea that you've taken your committee on the road is absolutely fantastic. I wish more parliamentary committees did that. I worked with the Senate on their Senate reform committee, and that's the recommendation I've been making to them: get the Senate committee on the road and people will understand the process a lot better. Having you folks here is wonderful, and I wish we saw you and other committees more often. I think what you're doing is the right way to go right now.

Mr. Blake Richards: Thank you.

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

Mr. Matt DeCourcey: Thank you, everybody, for being here.

Professor Desserud, thanks very much for highlighting the issue of citizen and voter engagement.

I'm struggling to identify what exactly it will take to better engage people at the ballot box. The decline in voter turnout is a matter that is afflicting western democracies across the world. In Germany the MMP system has seen a steady decline over the years; Ireland with STV, a steady decline; Japan, MMP, a steady decline; PR in Netherlands, a steady decline; New Zealand, after a slight bump in their first MMP election, a slight decline; the same in France with the two-round election majority system, the plurality system, or however you want to perceive that; and also in the U.S. and Canada. We're all seeing voter turnout on a trend of decline.

We have evidence to suggest that a move to a PR system could help bump voter turnout by upwards of 3%. That same testimony from André Blais suggests that strategic voting, though reduced in a different system, is effectively shifted to another consideration. Citizens are likely to express greater fairness in the election; however, their overall satisfaction in democracy isn't necessarily enhanced, and governments, although they may represent a more diverse viewpoint in Parliament, do not necessarily reflect the average policy preference of voters.

What are we to do?

● (1905)

Mr. Don Desserud: I have been saying that the current system is a major cause for the decline in civic engagement, but I probably should qualify that it's not just that, and it may not be even the most important factor. The most important reason, I believe, citizens are becoming less and less engaged is that governments are less and less capable of doing the things that need to be done. Their constraints are incredible. The windows of opportunity that they have, the wiggle room that they have in entrenched systems is smaller than probably it has ever been in our history.

There are just too many complicated issues with international trade, monetary policies, and so forth, that make it very difficult for governments to say, “Okay, we're going to have a complete 180° turn and have all these new policies.” They get in power and they realize that they can't, and therefore, they're constrained. The public sees governments becoming less and less effective in their ability to do these things. It's not a simple question of making promises and not keeping them. I suspect that politicians are far more sincere than the public sometimes think. They actually do want to make those changes, but when they get into power, they realize just how incredibly difficult that is.

That is a huge question, and it won't simply be solved by electoral reform. This has been a perplexing question for western democracies for quite some time. A lot of people have been thinking very carefully about it, but I don't know anyone who has come up with an answer of how we move to a system where our governments are able to actually fulfill the mandates they set out for themselves.

Mr. Matt DeCourcey: This may stray a bit from our mandate, but I think we have the opportunity to echo the things we hear, and they could be the purview of other committees, such as the committee that Scott and Ruby sit on that evaluates the procedures of the House and whatnot, or your work on Senate reform.

Can you give us any advice on where else our governing system should look to address changes that can enhance the democratic experience for Canadians?

Mr. Don Desserud: I was asked, and you may remember this, by our government in New Brunswick to see if there was a way we could have better involvement and civic engagement in the legislative process, and I did do a report on that a few years back. Again, what I focused on was the committee system, and I had two points that I made.

One was that the more the parliamentary committees, in this case legislative committees, were out in the community involved in making presentations, having people make presentations to the committee, having hearings like you're doing now, and were away from the capital, the better the sense they would have of what was concerning people, and perhaps come out with more creative solutions. That in turn would create—and you can tell me whether I'm right or wrong about this by the way—committee camaraderie.

You guys all get along well. I see you laughing over there.

Mr. Matt DeCourcey: Famously.

Mr. Don Desserud: This is terrific, because that breaks down the other problem that the public sees. They only see the little snippet, which is called question period. They think that's everything. They think that's the entire shooting match, that it's absolutely all you guys do. They don't know all the work that you do, so the more that you do this and the better we can see that parliamentarians work together and work together well, the better I think they're going to want to be involved, and they also learn how the process works.

Therefore, I'm really keen on the committee system as a tool you already have, that could be exploited far greater than it has been in the past.

● (1910)

The Chair: Thanks very much. We'll go to Mr. Cullen now.

Mr. Nathan Cullen: Thank you to our witnesses. I apologize for not being here earlier. I was dealing with some stuff back home.

Mr. Desserud, I think calling question period a “whole shooting match” is more appropriate than maybe you intended it to be.

Also, I have some caution when you talk about doing a sort of incremental step, a smaller change. We've been studying this for almost 100 years and we haven't done anything about it in Parliament. Parliament has been engaged with this topic on and off for almost a century.

It seems to me that there's the urgency of now. If you have an opportunity in which you have a government that has made a black and white promise to change the first-past-the-post system, we should seize the opportunity and come up with the best we can right now. I don't know when the next reform opportunity will come, and I think that then says to me that we should aim for consensus and aim for the best.

You also mentioned the collegiality of the committee. Some committees operate that way, and some don't. I don't know if you know, but this committee is based on a proportional representation of the vote in the last election, which by everything we do requires some amount of conversation among all the parties. No one can push one agenda. I've sat on committees in majority and in minority governments. The difference is incredible, from a member of Parliament's experience but also from the public's experience, where we've brought witnesses and tried to go on tour and been denied and all those sorts of things. I guess our first working model on proportionality is what is sitting in front of you today. I think it may also be just the personalities that we've collected, but I don't think it's just that. I think there's more.

I haven't spent a lot of time in previous committees talking about mandatory voting, and I will admit that my initial inclination toward it has been negative, just in terms of tone, sending to the voters that voting is a thing that if you don't do we'll punish you. We only do that for a few things: taxes, speed limits, and other fun things. We want voting to be an enfranchisement and the right to not vote to also be a choice.

Let me ask this, perhaps of you, Ms. Keenan, and Mr. Desserud after that.

Follow this logic out: that the long-form census, when it was not mandatory, was not representative in Canada. It didn't take a representative sample. It was a self-selected sample. Our voting is a self-selected sample as well. Therefore, one could argue it is not wholly representative.

It is overrepresented in our voting system right now toward older male, pale voters, right? We know that they disproportionately vote more than other groups in society, and there is no doubt then that we elect parliaments that don't look like Canada as a whole. So I'm making a pitch for exploring mandatory, maybe with an incentive rather than a punishment. Could you comment on that, Mr. Desserud? And I apologize if these questions have been asked already.

Mr. Don Desserud: I wondered whether someone was going to bring up the long-form census question.

Mr. Nathan Cullen: People can get so pumped up about a long-form census. I don't know if it was seizing other democracies, but it sure seized ours.

Mr. Don Desserud: I don't have an explanation of why. I was very disappointed. I didn't get the long form. I remember waiting by the mailbox. What's wrong with me? Come on. So I get that.

Mr. Nathan Cullen: You can tell us how many bathrooms you have in your house.

Mr. Don Desserud: Two.

Mr. Nathan Cullen: Good, we'll record that.

Mr. Don Desserud: I do understand that. A lot has to do, I think, with history as well. As Anna has said, she grew up with the system. They had that system since 1924, in fact, at some of the state levels even before that. They have over 100 years of experience with it, so it's a very different culture with that idea. It's about 22, or maybe 24, countries in the world that use mandatory voting by the way, and the vast majority, except for Australia and Belgium—and they are not such an exception and in a second I'll explain why.

Countries, when they went into some form of democratic system, had to make a cultural shift really quickly, or thought that they should, because people had no habit of voting. It just didn't exist. This was the way in which they thought they would do so.

Mr. Nathan Cullen: It was just for a crisis that preceded, or a movement from authoritarian governments into one in which people were voting. There was no culture of enfranchisement, so let's bring that culture in—

Mr. Don Desserud: That's right, yes, and even in the Belgian case and in the Australian case, if you go back to the time when they were doing it, this is a different world in terms of what we are thinking of with voting as well.

● (1915)

Mr. Nathan Cullen: To Matt's point earlier, the potential crisis we could be looking at is that people aren't voting, and when they don't vote they don't pay attention, etc. Maybe you could finish that thought, and then maybe Ms. Keenan could comment.

Mr. Don Desserud: My point is, if you try to bring this in now, let's just say the backlash would be incredible. They basically will say that you're ignoring the real problems and you're trying to paper them over. From a political standpoint—

Mr. Nathan Cullen: Okay. Could you answer that question? Also you talked about voter inequality, and I love the idea of seeking systems that give us voter equality. That idea in my mind resonates, that whatever systems in proportional seek that, that a vote cast anywhere by anybody for anybody is treated equally.

Ms. Anna Keenan: Yes, I agree. That applies to urban and rural voters as well, and this is again one of the things that I really like about dual member proportional. It doesn't discriminate against you based on where in the country you live.

On the topic of optional and mandatory voting, one of the things that I see as a problem with optional voting is that for the people who don't vote, you don't know why they haven't voted. You don't know if it's because they are disengaged or because they are expressing a protest vote and saying, “None of the above; you're not good enough.” I would propose that if you are to introduce mandatory voting in Canada you could potentially also consider the inclusion of a “none of the above” option on ballots for people to express an active protest vote.

There have also been instances in some Australian elections where there was an active campaign for people to drop empty ballots in the box. If you turned up at the ballot box and you got checked off the list, you voted, but people dropped in empty ballots as a form of protest. If you are to introduce mandatory voting, it does need to be done in such a way that you make it clear to people that they are not being forced to choose, but you're making it mandatory for people to engage and learn and educate themselves, to show up. It's making it a citizen duty.

The Chair: I will just follow up on that point, and then we'll get to Mr. Rayes.

You said something quite interesting. You could require people to show up. That seems more dubious to me than requiring them to vote, because when you require them to vote, you're requiring an action that will benefit the democracy. It's like requiring someone to fill out the census. You don't just want them to open the envelope, you want them to fill out the census, because you need the data. When you require someone to pay their taxes, it has a tangible benefit to the society, but what is the tangible benefit of having someone show up at the polling station and then walk away?

Ms. Anna Keenan: Dawn, you would probably know the actual statistics on this more. When you require people to show up, you get 95% voter turnout.

The Chair: Yes, I see. So you're linking it.

Ms. Anna Keenan: Exactly. You can't stand over somebody and force them to make a choice, but you can require that they show up, and whether that's virtual or in person is a great question.

[*Translation*]

The Chair: Mr. Rayes, you have the floor.

Mr. Alain Rayes: Hello.

I'd like to say that the more the committee work progresses, the more I'm becoming a firm believer in mandatory voting. I'm developing a greater and greater appreciation for the arguments on the subject. I think we'd solve a good portion of our problems with civic engagement and social inequality. The politicians don't take into account a certain social class, since fewer people in that class vote. I don't want to go back to the subject, but I did want to mention it. Several people have spoken about it.

My first question is for Ms. Wilson, and it concerns how we could get more women to vote.

Most people who speak to us about the proportional system think it would result in more women being elected to Parliament. However, experts tell us that it wouldn't have any impact and that incentive measures should be implemented instead.

People have suggested using open or closed lists. We could implement measures that would require the political parties to include women on the lists. This could ensure a certain amount of female representation in Parliament, in case other women candidates in the constituencies aren't elected.

If we have the power to include women candidates on the lists, why couldn't we simply implement measures that would require the parties to have 50% women candidates, without even changing the electoral system? I have trouble seeing a link between the electoral system and the percentage of women elected. If these measures could be implemented in the proportional system, why couldn't they be implemented in the current system?

I want your opinion on the subject.

● (1920)

[*English*]

Ms. Dawn Wilson: Your question is about mandatory voting in relation to women's election in government. We as the Coalition for Women in Government do not have a position on mandatory voting. I know Dr. Dessurud had mentioned some research to me earlier. What we know from the number of women voters in P.E.I. during the last provincial election is that almost 5,000 more women than men voted. The Up for Debate campaign to bring party leaders together to discuss issues of importance to women during the last federal election noted that almost 500,000 more women than men voted in Canada.

In terms of what parties can do, I think it goes back to incentives. Can we obligate parties to have 50% more women? There are negative and positive incentives that are possible, definitely. We as an organization do not have a position on that either. Our research on voluntary methods or regulatory or legislated, shows that on their own they do not lead to significant or substantial change.

A voluntary method that I might use as an example is a leader who really champions gender and diversity among candidates being nominated. It's fantastic. It can go a long way to encouraging more women to run. However, that may only live through that leader's tenure unless it's formalized in the form of a policy or a legislative change. It has to go hand in hand, I guess, is what I'm saying.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Alain Rayes: People tell us the advantage of closed or open lists is that the parties could be required to include as many women as men on the lists. If that's possible, what is preventing us from doing so starting today in our current electoral system?

[*English*]

Ms. Dawn Wilson: Exactly. It is possible without the list. The open or closed list actually allows for contagion effects where parties are influenced by, say, for example, smaller parties in the context of P.E.I. historically, that have nominated more women as candidates, but it hasn't translated into more women elected. Considering the list holistically, in the context of P.E.I., the 27 districts as a whole and considering perhaps gender, diversity, and geographic representation within that list, currently what happens is that nomination processes take place within silos. They happen independently of one another and you don't know what will happen until all 27 are nominated.

As you say, it is possible to have regulation, legislation that requires gender parity without a proportional system. It is possible.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Alain Rayes: Perfect.

My next question is for Ms. Keenan.

I was very surprised to hear you say that a referendum would set back progress. I don't know whether those were your exact words.

Professor Rémy Trudel, in Montreal, Quebec, spoke of a referendum as a powerful way to teach, inform and educate the population. We experienced this in Quebec during the referenda on separation. We often hear that only a small segment of the population is interested in the matter. You said yourself that, for one year, you and certain organizations directed all your energy toward trying to educate people.

We might not obtain the result we want from a referendum because there's always a risk. However, I think it's an incredible opportunity to inform and educate people. Together, the political parties and organizations would have the financial means to really increase awareness. It would be better than changing the electoral system simply for the sake of changing the electoral system.

Don't you agree?

● (1925)

[*English*]

Ms. Anna Keenan: That's a smart question.

Mr. Alain Rayes: There's no problem with the translation.

Ms. Anna Keenan: *Une bonne question*.

I would refer to what Marie Burge from the Cooper Institute said earlier. She spoke about a referendum on a question that requires people to create new knowledge. We are very actively trying to educate people about the plebiscite, the vote coming up in P.E.I. now and it is very difficult work. We want to be able to have one-to-one conversations with people. The reason there is low engagement in electoral reform generally is that Canadians have better things to do than to spend their evenings studying the details of electoral systems.

We are a very small minority—

The Chair: You're not telling us what we want to hear.

Ms. Anna Keenan: I would really like to be home with my nine-month-old baby right now. Most of you probably have better things to do as well. I would love to be investing my time in developing a sustainable transport system for P.E.I. or working on my dance school, or these sorts of things.

If it's a referendum on Quebec separatism, I find generally people in Quebec already know what that's about and have an opinion on it already. That's a great topic on which to have a referendum. On electoral reform, it requires people to build a huge amount of new knowledge before they can make that decision.

Please save the time and energy of Canadians, not only advocates —

[*Translation*]

Mr. Alain Rayes: Please stop there.

The Chair: We need to stop here, Mr. Rayes.

Mr. Alain Rayes: Things were starting to become very interesting, Mr. Chair.

Voices: Oh, oh!

The Chair: I know, I understand.

We'll finish with Ms. Sahota.

[*English*]

Ms. Ruby Sahota: My first question is for you, Ms. Keenan. First of all, thank you for all the hard work you are doing, putting a year of your life into educating Islanders about electoral reform. I can't imagine how difficult that really is, and I'm sure those LEGO displays come in very handy.

You said somewhere in your presentation something about the DMP system allowing, perhaps not today but in the future, more independence from parties. Can you explain that to me?

As I understand the system right now, the way I saw the ballot is that two people are generally running in a team, the first runner-up and the second runner-up, based on their party, and that's how people are selecting, as party teams. How do you see that maybe switching around?

Ms. Anna Keenan: I wish I had brought with me a sample ballot for DMP. I don't have it with me, but I believe Sean Graham provided you with one last week in Alberta.

Parties can run either just one single candidate or they can run a primary and a secondary candidate, but in addition, independent candidates can also be listed on the ballot, exactly the same as they are now. You have four different parties and then an independent or two. An independent can be elected in dual-member proportional in the same way as under first past the post, if they win the seat, but also if an independent candidate places second in the seat, that candidate will be elected to the second seat in that district.

In that way, it actually might lower barriers to independent candidates being elected. If you had two independent candidates and they were the first and second representatives, the first and second most popular representatives or candidates in that seat, then you would have two independent candidates in that seat.

The way that I understand mixed member proportional, potentially —I don't want to say; I could be wrong on this—independent candidates can run for the district seat and it's more complicated to have them run on the open lists. It can be done. In STV, we know the ballot is very complex. Independent candidates can be included, but it's very rare that they're elected.

Ms. Ruby Sahota: When I was campaigning for this past election, I heard a lot at the doors about members being available to their constituents. That's not something I really thought that much about before running as the candidate, and then I quickly realized that it is what people are really attached to. They want to see their member out in the community. They don't want to have you disappear to Ottawa and then just come back next election to knock on their door again for their vote. They want to see where you are.

As you were saying in that quote, I would have been somebody who thought, yes, you don't need to be attached to a riding; you need to just represent a political view of a party and it's all about policy-making. Of course, we enjoy that and that's why we get into it, but then we realize there's this whole other layer and a realm of connection with people and helping people with the day-to-day federal issues that they might encounter. In some communities, the populations can be more vulnerable to maybe not understanding the system and might rely on their members of Parliament a lot more than in other communities.

I'm very much a constituency member. I work a lot in my constituency. Before becoming a member, I didn't realize there was that much work. I never went up to my member's office, ever, before to talk to them about a problem. Then I realized, wow, every day there are tons and tons of people who have problems. Hopefully we can get to a point where the bureaucracy is fixed in a way where those problems don't occur, but the way it is right now, they do and they're reliant on their member of Parliament to be connected, to be close, to be accessible.

I do like that the MPs still maintain that connection, although in some of the bigger constituencies you might not know where the members could end up setting up shop. I think that could be a little bit of a problem. Anyway, I don't even know where I was going with that, but I just thought that quote was very interesting. I think it's a value that a lot of Canadians do hold highly, and they don't realize it at first.

In terms of women and representation here in P.E.I., Ms. Wilson, you said you couldn't talk about why they don't run federally, but you do have some statistics on maybe provincially why they don't run. I come from Ontario, and in Ontario we have better numbers than the federal average. We have 35.5% representation of women. What's going on in P.E.I. that might be different from what's happening in Ontario, yet they're still both under the same system?

● (1930)

Ms. Dawn Wilson: I don't think this is specific to P.E.I. We see this in provinces across the country and in the territories as well, the under-representation of women in government.

We reached a peak of 26.7% in 2007. In the past two provincial elections, we've had a steady decline, which is concerning. What we do know about voters in P.E.I. is that they do not discriminate against women at the vote. Women are just as likely to win in ridings against men, which is good to know.

The problem lies with getting women's names on the ballots here. It's a nomination process. Parties are simply not nominating women in high enough numbers to make substantial change. Yes, work needs to be done there, and we've been working with individuals as well as political parties to try to increase that. We do see proportional representation as one way of addressing that.

Ms. Ruby Sahota: Once again, even in the proportional systems they've talked about nomination processes, and they would still have to get nominated, would they not?

Ms. Dawn Wilson: Yes, so when we talk about the nomination processes in the proportional system, we're thinking within the context of the contagion of fact and lists, and developing a list or a slate based on diversity characteristics, such as gender, geography, language, and all those things you might be thinking about as you're looking holistically. As I mentioned earlier, the problem with the nomination process currently is that it happens independently of each other within districts, and you don't know exactly what the next district will do.

There are things we can do to address that within all systems. It's just that currently that's not happening.

Ms. Ruby Sahota: You would see proportional representation as one way to increase that.

Could I have a few more seconds? I just want to finish up with Professor Desserud.

The Chair: Go ahead.

Ms. Ruby Sahota: Professor, this may not even be that applicable to this committee, but at the committee that we were mentioning, PROC, that Scott and I sit on, we've been talking a lot about revisiting our procedural rules and making Parliament more inclusive. I know that you've done a report for New Brunswick, and you've talked about reformatting QP, question period.

Can you give us a bit of insight about what we could do to make Parliament a little more appeasing to more people who might even want to run for Parliament or government?

Mr. Don Desserud: I have not worked on QP. I did mention that this was an issue, but I haven't done anything on question period. I am interested in the British model, which the Prime Minister isn't talking about, but the prime minister's questions is a one day a week thing and a different structure than we have in Canada now. I'm not saying it's better, but I think it would be interesting to compare to see whether there's something that could be learned from that system.

We do know that one of the issues that has come from the televising of question period is the way in which MPs, particularly on the government side, are schooled to answer questions so they correspond with the media clip they want to see broadcast on the news. The last time I was visiting question period, and another government was in power at the time, by the way, I was interested to see cabinet ministers giving the same answers to a set of questions, even though the questions had changed, and for the simple reason that at the first time they answered the question, the microphones had turned off, and the second time they answered it, they cut it a little better so they got it within the time in which the microphone was on.

The microphones are not for each other, as you know; they're for the media who were listening. Clearly what they were trying to do was to get the clip in.... What do you do with that? That has changed considerably. People are recommending now that the Senate be televised. I think it's a really good idea, so we can't go backward on that one. That media influence on the way in which question period is functioning is a huge issue in a way people understand what question period is and the impression that they're getting from it. I think it's changed the behaviour of members.

● (1935)

The Chair: Thanks very much.

Thank you to our panel. It was very engaging. I think you could tell by the reaction of the members that all of today was very engaging for us.

Thank you, Ms. Keenan, for revisiting DMP. It allowed us to really make sure that we understand its characteristics.

Thank you, Ms. Wilson, for your work on the challenge of bringing more women into elected office.

Thank you, Professor Desserud, for giving us a bit of a reality check on how our system really works and how complicated the causes of the declining voting rate are. I must say that you brought up some very good points about how difficult it is for governments to get results in a globalized economy and system.

Thank you very much.

We're going to go to the open-mike session. We have about 10 participants who wish to come up to the mikes.

For those who may not have been here earlier today, I'll just go over how we do this. Essentially, we have two microphones. I'll call up two people to begin with, one at mike number one, the other at mike number two. While the first person is speaking at mike number one, that will provide time for the person at mike number two to prepare. Then when mike number two is free, I'll invite someone to take that position while they wait to speak, and so on. We will do a little rotation.

Ms. Elizabeth May: Mr. Chair, I don't want to delay things or interrupt. You said we had 10 people on the list. There are people who have wandered in more recently, and I just wanted to let them know—I think I'm correct—that anyone who is in the room and didn't put their name down earlier, we'd have them—

The Chair: Yes, but there is a process to follow.

Go outside. There's somebody with a list, and you can put your name on the list.

I'd invite Peter Bevan-Baker and Eleanor Reddin to the mikes, please.

We have a two-minute time limit, which tends to work well. We'll see how it goes tonight.

Go ahead, Mr. Baker.

Mr. Peter Bevan-Baker (As an Individual): Thank you very much.

Our Island, and I would like to suggest our country, have been built on strong principles, principles like fairness, neighbourliness, inclusivity, and integrity. I would like a voting system that reflects those values.

On fairness, Islanders and Canadians like fair play. We don't like injustice. Is it fair when 40% of Islanders elect a majority government that holds 67% of the seats and therefore 100% of the power? I would like an electoral system that reflects our desire for fairness.

As for neighbourliness, one feature of island life is our desire to help each other, and that's reflected in an infinite variety of ways, in fundraisers and socials, going all the way back to the day when you would help your neighbour get the crop in. This naturally collaborative instinct is not reflected in politics today. Politics is combative, hostile, and unfriendly. It's quite the opposite of who we are as Islanders and Canadians. I'd prefer an electoral system that promotes co-operation and working together towards shared solutions.

On inclusivity, Islanders are inclusive. We don't like to leave people out. We embrace diversity. But our current electoral system consistently creates a legislature that does not reflect the rich variety of island life. We are diverse ethnically, socially, and in age, and yet our Parliament is dominated, as somebody said, by pale, stale males. My community is 51% female, and yet our legislature is 15% female. I would like an electoral system that would result in a more diverse Parliament that better reflects who we are.

Concerning integrity, Islanders are principled people, but our politics, unfortunately, has not always been that way. Patronage, cronyism, and corruption have long, storied histories on Prince Edward Island, and part of the reason for that is that, for over a century and a half, two parties have shared power almost equally, holding 100% of the power 50% of the time, which has been fine for them, but it's created all sorts of problems. I'd prefer an electoral system that would minimize the opportunities for the abuse of power, not facilitate it.

In short, I would prefer a proportional system.

Thank you.

● (1940)

The Chair: That's a very eloquent statement. Thank you.

Ms. Elizabeth May: Just so you know, Peter Bevan-Baker is also a member of the Prince Edward Island Special Committee on Democratic Renewal and is the leader of the Green Party of P.E.I.

The Chair: Mr. Bevan-Baker, yes, we were discussing you at dinner, but not by name, so it's nice to meet you.

Ms. Eleanor Reddin, go ahead, please.

Ms. Eleanor Reddin (As an Individual): I support proportional representation. It only makes sense to me that the percentage of votes that a party receives should be reflected in the percentage of seats in Parliament or in the legislature. I appreciate that the committee has come to P.E.I., but I suggest that you not use our current electoral reform process as a model.

I realize that a number of people, as Anna Keenan mentioned, have put a lot of effort into the current process, but ranking five possible options on a ballot in a plebiscite is unlikely to result in any change for the better.

I suggest that you not recommend a referendum or a plebiscite. Recent examples of referenda are Brexit, and the failure of the peace process in Colombia. Referendums are not necessarily good indicators of what would result in positive social change, political change.

Prime Minister Trudeau and the Liberals promised that the last election would be the last first-past-the-post election, so there's no need for a referendum or a plebiscite.

The only reasonable alternative, in my view, to first past the post is proportional representation.

I hope the committee will not recommend a referendum or a plebiscite, but will choose a form of proportional representation from the available models and put that forward for action. Personally, I favour the dual-member proportional, and I did even before Anna made all those convincing arguments this evening.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Go ahead, Ms. Lucy Morkunas.

Ms. Lucy Morkunas (As an Individual): I commend this committee for the work your are doing. This is proportional representation in action.

I'm an accidental political junkie. There was little political engagement in my family when I was growing up in Ontario. Over the last few years I became concerned with government at both the provincial and national levels. I stumbled into an introduction to political science course at UPEI a couple of years ago and it just went from there. Another course on electoral reform coincided with Prince Edward Island's own exploration of the topic of electoral reform. I wrote a paper on the best electoral system for Prince Edward Island and got a pretty good mark. I am now volunteering to help bring proportional representation to the island.

Last fall, the P.E.I. Special Committee on Democratic Renewal hosted a series of public consultations. I remember commenting from the audience to the committee that I didn't support a plebiscite, but at that point it was a done deal as far as P.E.I. was concerned. It is not a done deal for you. I think you, as a committee that reflects the popular vote, that has listened to the testimony of experts and civic leaders, that has access to resources of analysts and researchers, are in a better position to make an informed recommendation for change to PR, and PR it should be. There has never been a citizens' assembly or a royal commission or a study that has supported the status quo. In taking all that information, do what is best for voters: make 2019 the first election with proportional representation.

● (1945)

The Chair: Thank you.

We'll hear from Teresa Doyle now.

Ms. Teresa Doyle (As an Individual): Thank you so much for coming here to Charlottetown.

I am a musician, an activist, and an incurable political junkie. I am looking around this room at the faces of people who have the opportunity to make history. You've been given such an incredible task. What you are about to do is the most important thing in Canadian democracy since women got the vote.

I feel the excitement in this room, and I know you can do it. Even if we fail with our flawed plebiscite here in Prince Edward Island, we are all working so hard. You are the people who can get this job done.

I've been voting for 40 years. Sadly, I have never voted for the winning party, but I am not a particularly unlucky person, because in most of those cases I was in a group of 60% of the country that was not represented by the government in power. You have as little as 38% of the popular vote giving a party 100% of the power, and that happens in Prince Edward Island over and over again.

A couple of years ago, we had a very unpopular highway project, and in an informal plebiscite, 93% of Islanders said, “We do not want those hemlocks coming down. The road is fine the way it is. We don't want to spend that $26 million.” What happened? The government with 38% of the popular vote rammed that through.

This makes the work of activists absolutely gruelling. In my lifetime, I have spent so much of my time when I could be writing songs coming to meetings and begging people, who were actually being paid, to do the job, to do the right thing. But 60% of us go home empty-handed because the power continuously lies with so few.

I am happy to say that I ran for the Green Party in the federal election last year, and 75% of the Green Party candidates in Prince Edward Island were women. We had a very strong showing. I had a great experience, but I knew there was no chance of winning. I am very concerned about the state of our democracy, but this woman will not run again under first past the post.

Please, make history. We have great confidence in this committee.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you.

Go ahead, Mr. Philip Brown.

Mr. Philip Brown (As an Individual): Thank you, and welcome to Prince Edward Island. We are very pleased that the committee came to Prince Edward Island.

First, I want to touch on the subject of a preferential ballot. I have a strong opposition to that. The root of this is choosing a preference where there is agreement on the subject, and the exercise is to distill the options. It is efficient when choosing a variation of a proposition. I'd like you to think about choosing a new car. You decide on the make or the model—or you decide whether it's going to be a four-door car, a minivan, or a sports car—and then you decide which one you are going to buy. You don't have to choose the differences. You have already decided on one thing, and then you distill that down.

Parties must present voters with options, and vigorous, respectful debate is not an enemy of democracy. A preferential ballot will lead to fewer policy options, as all parties will try to be at least the second choice.

If we are going to change the way Canadians vote, we should allow Canadians the opportunity to vote on the options. To say Canadians voted for this in the last election, I believe, is a stretch. Canadians voted for a $10-billion deficit, and I think the budget presented one slightly higher than that. Every election we make choices. I expect most non-partisan voters have to accept some compromise when they choose a party and its platform. I have friends who had much trouble voting for the current government based on a certain issue, but they thought the previous government had to change, so they did that.

I don't believe this issue was central to the mandate that the government received, but I do agree with Mr. Cullen that the desire of the government to look at the subject does present the opportunity for a full and wholesome discussion. If the discussion concludes that our current system is the best option, then this discussion is still worthwhile.

Thank you.

● (1950)

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Go ahead, Mr. MacMillan

Mr. Ron MacMillan (As an Individual): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you to the committee for coming to P.E.I. It brings Parliament to our province and we're very appreciative of that.

I guess I'm another—what is it—male, pale, and stale, so I apologize for that. I was the Conservative candidate in the last election in Charlottetown—the unsuccessful Conservative candidate, I should say, so I'm open to all options available. I have been unable to find any option that would have got me elected so if you can come up with one, kudos to you. That's all I can say.

Like other candidates across Canada and in Prince Edward Island, I knocked on thousands of doors during the federal election. I can only speak of the Charlottetown riding, which is where I ran as a candidate, and I can say that the electoral system was not front and centre. It may have been brought up with candidates for other parties —I'm not sure—but with me it was not.

I got asked about lots of issues at the doors I knocked on, but this was not one of them. There were issues like jobs, the EI system, Canada Post, and the refugee crisis. There were many issues that were brought up, but this was not a significant issue, at least not to me.

I'm not sure what the answer is, whether it's a referendum, a plebiscite, or a ballot question at the election in the fall of 2019. I'm not sure, but I do think, Mr. Chair, that there is some process beyond just this.

I appreciate the excellent work this committee is doing, but I do think there is some process beyond this and beyond just going back to Parliament, because if it was not an issue at the door for me, it may not be an issue in other ridings either. Above all, it's very important to get buy-in from the public on this issue. This is a very important issue for Canadians. I offer a word of caution to the committee. Just make sure that the public buys in to whatever the recommendations to Parliament are, and then it's up to Parliament.

There is a process out there. I can't put my finger on whether it is a referendum, a plebiscite, or a ballot question on the next election, but I think there is some process beyond this committee and beyond Parliament to ensure that there is buy-in from the public.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. MacMillan.

Mr. Peter Kizoff, go ahead, sir.

Mr. Peter Kizoff (As an Individual): Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman, and thank you all for being here. I realize it's a tremendous contribution you're making of time and effort, travelling the country, one-night-stands, going from place to place like rock stars, and presumably not trashing too many hotel rooms. I know it's been a lot of hard work, and like many other Canadians, I am interested in this issue and very appreciative of that.

I want to start off with something with a little audience participation, if I could. Could all those who can comfortably stand up, please stand up for a moment.

This is an election 100 years ago and I'm going to arbitrarily assign 4% of this group, which is about 30 people, as electors. You, sir, will represent indigenous voters, because this is who was voting 100 years ago, so, sit down, sir, please. You, sir, will represent south Asians 100 years ago. You sit down, please. You, sir, will represent east Asians. You sit down, please. All the women sit down, please.

This is who was voting 100 years ago, lest we forget. Thanks. Everyone can sit down.

I agree with our previous musician friend that this is history in the making, and I can't underline that more. This is a historic opportunity. Now that I'm older, I play a little game with my friends called, “I'm so old that...” whether it's in my work as a family physician or as an observer of social change. Just think back to a previous generation, whatever it is, and think about the illegality of homosexual orientation, and the illegality of interracial marriage in the sixties, in the United States. The list goes on and on. We changed profoundly. We look back at previous generations and say, “How the hell could they do that?“

Well, this is what we have now. What this is is the GTA, anatomically correct, so to speak. Each of these little animals represents 51,000 voters, colour-coded according to the party they voted for. In one group over here are those who voted Liberals, about 1.25 million voters in the 50 ridings of the GTA, and over here are the same number of voters, within 1%, who voted in the group either CPC, NDP, or Green. Check out the outcome by MPs. There are 47 Liberal MPs and three CPC MPs.

I'm on the executive committee for the riding that I live in, which is Simcoe North, in Ontario. I was away on a canoe trip when you were in Toronto, and that's why I'm here. I'm visiting my friends in P.E.I.

I go around to schools and talk about electoral reform. I would challenge any member of this committee, if you wish to take up the challenge, to go into a high school civics class, as I have been doing for the past two years, and try to explain how first past the post makes sense. I guarantee that to anyone who's not been indoctrinated in voting first past the post, it's inexplicable. You cannot make sense of it. Unless you think I'm manipulating by presenting an aberrant situation here, about 52% of these voters got what they voted for, which is about what happened in the last election. As you may know, only 49% of people got what they voted for.

This is the take-home message, I hope, at the end of the day. Who can live with this? Who can honestly live with this? This is an accurate reflection of what happens every election under first past the post.

My challenge is that you have to look at historical perspective and see that you are making history. Get rid of first past the post. That cannot work. Where you go from there is up to you and how to make it work. First past the post's day may have come, but it's gone now.

By that same token—and it's the last point I'll make—if the argument for a referendum is that we want Canadians to have a chance to show us their preference, then you have to have a system where Canadians have a chance to show their preference, not a 50% chance, but close to a 100% chance.

By all means, have a referendum that doesn't have first past the post on it. Have people try a new system for two or three election cycles and vote again, because first past the post is going down if it goes head to head against any kind of proportional representation system.

Thank you for that time.

● (1955)

The Chair: That was more than two minutes, but it was well worth it.

Patrick Reid, go ahead.

Mr. Patrick Reid (As an Individual): I just want to thank all of you for coming to this small place that we call home. This means a lot.

I learned about this about a week ago. It made me the most enthusiastic about anything to do with government in my entire life. The fact that you are here really means a lot.

I'll give you an idea of where that enthusiasm has come from. I have been through five elections now, believe it or not. I'm only 32, but I've been through five elections, which I think is one piece of evidence of how our current system is broken.

I can tell you right now that I'm trying not to be dramatic by saying that I don't really feel like I live in a democracy right now. Democracy, as far as I've been told my entire life, is when a majority come to a consensus. That hasn't existed in my whole life. That's just flat out wrong to begin with. That right away is really dismal. I think all the committee has to do is look at the trend in terms of voter turnout as the population has gotten older and more young people are starting to want to become engaged. There's absolutely nothing preventing people from becoming engaged except our voting system. I haven't voted once where I thought it counted. I turn up every single time because I care about this country and I go home hoping that some day somebody will make a change to this system. This is the first time that there's been any talk about it.

Essentially, I think it's necessary, unless you think it's right that Canada has 58% of its population show up at the polls, and that gives the government a mandate to basically make every single decision for four years. Even as an MP I would not be very enthusiastic showing up knowing that only 58% showed up, and also that 39%, essentially, make all the decisions.

I'm here hopefully to advocate on behalf others who have voted recently, basically other young people who've only experienced a minority majority government.

I'm also here to advocate for a system called direct party and representative voting. I know that it's not currently in place in any federal government in the world. What I'm hoping is that this committee will look at some of the failures and some of the strengths of the systems and perhaps be open-minded enough to—

● (2000)

The Chair: Do you have some kind of description of the system that you could give to our analysts?

Mr. Patrick Reid: Absolutely. Yes, I can give you—

The Chair: —because to actually go over it would be a little difficult.

Mr. Patrick Reid: The beauty of it is it's very simple. I agree with Anna Keenan. Putting this in a plebiscite or a referendum, the complexities that obviously...I mean we have a committee on this. You are spending hours and hours and hours on this. A referendum, a plebiscite can't happen if you want change.

Essentially, in a nutshell, you can find a very articulate—far more articulate than me—presentation on DPR voting at dprvoting.org. It's a two ballot system—

The Chair: If you do have something in writing, that would—

Mr. Patrick Reid: Yes, absolutely.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Well this has been a great day in Charlottetown. Everyone has been so engaging. We really thank you for coming out and making it a very special set of hearings and open-mike sessions for us.

Tomorrow, we're off to Fredericton. It's our last day on a three-week tour, but then in about 10 days, we have one more stop, which is Iqaluit, and then we can say that, truly, we've covered the whole country.

Thank you again for coming.

● (2005)

Mrs. Sherry Romanado: Mr. Chair, a couple of people in the audience have said that they want to see collaboration, and that it was nice to see this committee getting along. I just want to mention that last evening, members from all three parties did go and get screeched in, in Newfoundland. I just wanted to let you know that we went together.

The Chair: On a more technical note, the committee will be meeting at 8 a.m. in the lobby tomorrow morning for the bus ride to Fredericton.

Thank you very much to everyone. Good night.