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Chair

Mr. Francis Scarpaleggia

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● (0850)

[*English*]

The Chair (Mr. Francis Scarpaleggia (Lac-Saint-Louis, Lib.)): We are beginning our 43rd meeting in the context of this study on electoral reform.

We have with us today, from Forum Research, Mr. Lorne Bozinoff, president and CEO, and Mr. William Schatten, research director. Appearing as an individual is Prof. William Cross, professor, from Carleton University. From the Canadian Federation of University Women, we have Sheila Lacroix and Madeleine Webb.

We also have with us in the audience the political science class of Professor Paul Thomas from Carleton.

Welcome. I hope that you'll find our discussion interesting and that you'll do all your term papers on electoral reform.

Ms. Dara Lithwick (Committee Researcher): They've already written them.

Voices: Oh, oh!

The Chair: They've already written them?

She went to Carleton, so she has the inside scoop.

Mr. Cullen.

Mr. Nathan Cullen (Skeena—Bulkley Valley, NDP): Thank you. I'm not interested in taking too much time from our excellent panel this morning. I gave notice to the committee last night of a small motion.

Also, welcome to our friends from Carleton. Best behaviour, by the way, everybody. I guess that's what you were trying to say, Chair? Okay. Got it.

The motion is that the committee invite the Minister of Democratic Institutions to table a summary of her public consultations with the committee.

The Chair: You're asking for consent, or for unanimous consent? We'll start there.

Mr. Nathan Cullen: Yes, we could start with consent, if that feels good. We can go down from that if it doesn't work.

The Chair: We have Mr. Reid, and then somebody on this side.

Mr. Scott Reid (Lanark—Frontenac—Kingston, CPC): I just wanted to ask Mr. Cullen.... I'm not suggesting any changes to the motion; I just want to confirm. When he says "to table" it, does he mean to table it in person and actually come before us as a witness, or simply to provide a written summary?

Mr. Nathan Cullen: I suppose I was leaving that to her choice. We have a few meetings left, so if she wanted to present, I would certainly welcome—

Mrs. Sherry Romanado (Longueuil—Charles-LeMoyne, Lib.): On a point of order, Mr. Chair, there is a minimum 48 hours to have notice. We do not have that 48 hours of notice. Therefore, I ask that this be respected.

Thank you.

The Chair: One moment, please.

I'm told that in this committee there isn't a minimum time limit.

Mrs. Sherry Romanado: Mr. Chair, we passed that motion at the first meeting, when we said that any substantive motions must be given 48 hours' notice. We have not had that and therefore I respectfully ask that it be maintained.

The Chair: I will double-check the motion with the clerk.

I'll read out the motion we adopted:

> That 48 hours' notice be required for any substantive motion to be considered by the Committee, unless the substantive motion relates directly to business then under consideration....

It seems clear to me that it relates to what we're doing.

Mr. Cullen.

Mr. Nathan Cullen: Yes, there was no intent to.... We talked about it last night. This is simply what I assumed to be an oversight from the minister's office.

The minister is both the Minister of Democratic Institutions and a member of Parliament. We've just noticed—and we could be wrong—that she may have submitted her results from the town hall already, but if not, then if the oversight was made, we would certainly invite her to tell us what she learned in her constituency of Peterborough. It's what every other MP has done and what the committee has been receiving.

The Chair: Are you saying, Mr. Cullen, that you would like to know if the minister submitted a reported from her town hall held in Peterborough?

Mr. Nathan Cullen: Yes, at the very minimum. I would imagine that since she has also been touring the country, as we know, Mr. Chair, she might also want to give us a summary of what she learned from those meetings. I don't know why she wouldn't. This is all funnelling into the democratic reform committee. We will then make an informed decision and recommend something to the government.

The Chair: We'll check if she submitted a report as the MP for Peterborough. We'll check that. If not, I'm just thinking now, there was a deadline of the 14th.

Mr. Nathan Cullen: Yes, I know.

The Chair: Would we be in a position to take a brief from the minister at this date?

Mr. Nathan Cullen: Whatever format it would come in, there's no ill will in the motion.

The Chair: No, I understand.

Mr. Nathan Cullen: It's as simple as it is, and it is in conjunction with the work that we are doing. We're just simply asking—

The Chair: You're asking for a brief, basically.

Mr. Nathan Cullen: Sure...what it says, a summary of her public consultations with the committee.

The Chair: Okay, Mr. DeCourcey, please.

Mr. Matt DeCourcey (Fredericton, Lib.): I appreciate the motion put forward by Mr. Cullen. It's simple in what it states, and I have no aversion to asking the minister to table a summary of a report, although I do have concern that it mixes the work that she's doing and the work that we're doing, which is to be tabled to Parliament for her offering in the development of legislation. I do have concerns with bringing her back in front of the committee. We've already heard from her, and she has been busy talking to Canadians in a different process.

If we're getting into a conversation about what tabling a summary means, then I would respectfully ask that we move this whole conversation to a later point so that we can get to the witnesses. If we're simply asking that she table a brief summary of the discussions she has had with Canadians across the country, then I'm less averse to moving quickly on that.

● (0855)

The Chair: Ms. May, please.

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

I'm surprised that this is appearing to be controversial or in any way partisan. I would put forward the possibility, having had a town hall with the minister in my own riding, that it could be that there are reports from all her consultations submitted from me, in the case of the hearing that she attended, which was the town hall we had on Saturna Island. I know that before she got to Saturna, she was in Whitehorse with Larry Bagnell. He may have submitted a report. I don't think there's any intent to be putting her on the spot, or not bringing her back to the committee. What I look at is how we have consulted Canadians. There have been three streams. There's what we've done as a committee, which is extensive, there's what individual MPs have done in their own town halls, and there's this other piece, with the parliamentary secretary and the minister consulting with Canadians.

If her summary is one page that says, "I was in the following places, and as you know reports have been filed by the relevant MPs in those places", then that's it. I saw this as an invitation to cover off the possibility that, as busy as the minister is, we don't want our procedural rules...October 14 was the deadline. I don't want to suddenly find ourselves unable to accept a written submission. I don't want her to come back before the committee as a witness. I don't see any benefit in that. I'll be blunt about it. I don't see any point in that, but I don't want to foreclose any consultation evidence into this committee from the minister, which I've seen as an important part of the stream of information that we are receiving as a committee.

The Chair: I should mention that we did receive a report on a town hall held in Peterborough, so that would be the minister's report. It was a town hall she held as an MP. We did receive that.

Monsieur Boulerice.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Alexandre Boulerice (Rosemont—La Petite-Patrie, NDP): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

The Minister was here at the start of thes consultation process, but it would be very helpful to hear from her at the end of the process. As Ms. May said, there were three parallel processes. The minister held her own consultations and met with Canadians. So I would really like to know what Quebecers and Canadians said to her.

[*English*]

The Chair: Mr. Reid.

Mr. Scott Reid: The reason I asked Mr. Cullen the question about her coming here is that I think it's essential that she come here. I say this for the following reason. When she came here on July 6, I think it was, Ms. May asked her whether she would follow the recommendations of this committee. She said she would take it into consideration. That's all she said, so we did not know at that point what amount of weight we were going to have.

Yesterday we learned that the Prime Minister is indicating that he may give some weight or no weight to the work the committee's doing. This is of foundational importance to the committee, knowing whether or not we are working on something that is going to go nowhere. I want to be able to ask her about that, to get confirmation. Is it the case that this committee's work will all be for naught? That seems like a reasonable question to ask.

I would like to add a very important point. While this committee was travelling, it went to Montreal and St. John's. The reason I didn't join you was that I was here in this room with a different committee, the procedure and house affairs committee, to question Marc Mayrand. Our exchanges are a matter of public record, and in those exchanges I asked him about timing issues. He indicated that timelines are very tight, but he thinks he can manage to bring in new legislation based on our recommendations. He says—and you can see it in the record—that he's giving tremendous weight to the committee's recommendations.

Ms. Ruby Sahota (Brampton North, Lib.): Mr. Chair, I just want to bring up—

● (0900)

The Chair: Ms. Sahota, do you have a point of order?

Ms. Ruby Sahota: Yes.

Is this a new motion we're getting right now, or should we get it in writing and then discuss it later? We have witnesses here. Should we discuss Mr. Cullen's motion and get that over with?

The Chair: We seem to be going from asking for a summary of public consultations to a request for the minister to appear. That seems to be where we're headed. What I would suggest, because we have witnesses and can't extend the time of the meeting today, is that we take this up this evening. Would you agree with that?

Mr. Scott Reid: That seems reasonable. I'll end my presentation with the words I gave and I'll take it up again this evening.

If you don't mind my saying so, I might introduce another motion that would deal with the issue of having the minister testify for the reasons I gave. If we don't get the timing down, everything we're doing will be for naught, and she plays a critical role in that.

The Chair: Okay. Why don't we do that this evening. We won't be under pressure and we can have a better discussion.

Is there unanimous consent to do that? Would you agree?

Mr. Nathan Cullen: I said at the beginning of all this that I hoped it would be quick. Apparently, it's causing some consternation, so we'll hear from our witnesses.

The Chair: We will do that. Thank you, Mr. Cullen.

That allows us to proceed with Forum Research for 10 minutes. You can split your time, five minutes each, or whatever you decide.

We'll start with Mr. Bozinoff, if you wish.

Mr. Lorne Bozinoff (President and CEO, Forum Research Inc.): Good morning. I'm Lorne Bozinoff, president and founder of Forum Research, the publisher of the Forum Poll.

Forum Research does more media polls in Canada than all other polling companies combined. We feel that public opinion research can be called the pulse of democracy.

With me today is William Schatten, director of research. I want to thank you for the opportunity to address the committee today. Forum is a non-partisan organization and as such has no agenda or bias regarding the issues we poll, and specifically, electoral reform.

I would like to make just a couple of comments before my colleague presents some detailed findings. I would in fact suggest that the committee keeps in mind three things. I call them the three Cs. The first one is collaboration. Are Canadians aware of this committee and do they understand what the committee is studying? Sadly, we see that the majority of Canadians are neither aware of the committee nor understand the reform options.

The second is consultation. Electoral reform is about changing the rules of the game. Has there been effective consultation with all Canadians before final recommendations are implemented? Here I am talking about mandates and referenda.

Third is consent. Is there or has the committee built a consensus concerning electoral reform? I can tell you that as of last week there is no such consensus among Canadians on the specifics of electoral reform.

Mr. Schatten will now present some detailed survey findings.

Mr. William Schatten (Research Director, Forum Research Inc.): Thank you, everyone, for hosting us today.

My name is Mr. William Schatten. I'm from Forum Research. I'm a research director.

As you are aware, Forum has done several surveys on the topic of electoral reform. Most recently, we conducted one across Canada. It was in field from October 7 through October 9. We conduct our public opinion polling surveys through a telephone random-digit dial. It's connected to what's called an IVR, an interactive voice recognition platform. This survey I'm going to be discussing today has a total size of 1,043, which produces a margin of error of approximately 3%, meaning plus or minus 3%.

To start off, we probed Canadians on the importance of electoral reform among a series of other competing popular issues facing Canadians right now. Electoral reform had a fairly high rating. This is on a nine-point scale, where one is not at all important to Canadians and nine is extremely important. Electoral reform, on average, across Canada had a 5.5 rating.

There are some nuances in the results. Electoral reform is most important among NDP supporters, at 6.6 out of nine, and is particularly high among residents of Quebec as well, at six out of nine. It's least important among Conservative supporters, at 4.5 out of nine.

When Canadians were asked, “Should Canada change its electoral reform system?”, half of Canadians indicated that we should change our electoral system, at 45%, a third disagreed, and a fifth were unsure. Most support for electoral reform is found in British Columbia and Quebec and also among younger voters.

We also probed Canadians on whether they were aware that this committee had been formed. There's an even split about awareness. Just under half of Canadians were aware. There was more awareness in B.C., at 59%, and less awareness in Quebec, at 36%.

Could Canadians describe the different competing electoral systems? That is a fairly tough question, but we phrased it as, “If you were asked by a friend to describe proportional representation, first past the post, or ranked ballot systems, would you be able to confidently describe these systems?” There was higher confidence in proportional representation, at 63%. First past the post was at 54%, and the ranked ballot was at 41%. However, to put that in context, we than asked, “What electoral system does Canada currently have in place?” Only 40% indicated first past the post. A fifth didn't know, a fifth said we had PR, 12% said ranked ballot, and 4% said we had something else entirely. So there is a knowledge gap that exists among the Canadian public on this topic.

Finally, we asked, “What is your preference?” We then went on and gave a brief summary description of the three different systems and asked Canadians, “What is your first choice for an electoral system for Canada?” Most popular was first past the post, at 42%, followed by proportional representation, at 35%, then ranked ballot, at 23%.

We then asked, “What is your second choice for an electoral system?” Ranked ballot was the most popular second choice, at 40%, then PR, at 35%, and first past the post, at 25%.

Finally, we asked, “Did you vote in the last federal election in October of last year?” Then we focused specifically on non-voters. We asked non-voters, “What is the primary reason you did not vote in the election?” Here are some points that speak to this committee. Eleven per cent of non-voters indicated that the reason they didn't vote was that they felt their vote would not count. When we asked non-voters specifically, “If we had a different electoral system, would that have encouraged you to vote?”, 28% of non-voters said, yes, they would have voted if we had a different electoral system.

That's the conclusion of our results. We have polled on this issue several times. These releases are made available publicly, and we'll be continuing to poll on this issue in the foreseeable future.

Thank you.

● (0905)

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

We'll go now to Professor Cross, for 10 minutes, if you wish.

Professor William Cross (Professor, Carleton University, As an Individual): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I'll begin by telling you a bit about myself. I'm a professor of political science at Carleton University, where I hold a research chair in Canadian parliamentary democracy. My research is primarily in the area of political parties and electoral democracy in Canada, and comparatively with other Westminster democracies. I'm the immediate past-president of the Canadian Political Science Association, and perhaps of particular relevance to your work, I was director of research for the New Brunswick Commission on Legislative Democracy, under Premier Lord, in 2004-05.

I am, of course, acutely aware that you have been studying this issue quite intensely for several months, and that you have already heard from dozens of political scientists and others interested in the issue. I suspect many of you could probably teach a master's course in electoral systems. Accordingly, I'll refrain from rehearsing the pros and cons of the various systems and the representational implications of them. Rather, I'll use my 10 minutes to focus on something that I think is very important but has received very little attention thus far, and that is the implications of various electoral systems for the internal operations and organization of our political parties.

I do have views on the other more general issues facing the committee, and I'd be happy to discuss those in the question period, if you would find that of use.

Many of the functions of our parties and the nature of internal party democracy are affected by the choice of electoral system. These include the principal functions of our parties: selecting candidates, election campaigning, government formation, and party leadership selection. Time will not allow me to say much in detail, but I will use examples from Australia, Ireland, and New Zealand, which between them use STV, MMP, and AV systems, and are, I believe, among the most useful comparators, as they are parliamentary democracies with similar political cultures and democratic infrastructure to Canada.

For candidate nomination, if MMP is chosen, I suspect it would likely come with closed party lists. The question then is, who in the party has the authority to construct a list? Using New Zealand as an example, we find that the three main parties—Labour, National, and the Greens—all hold delegated conferences at which party members elect the candidates to be on the list. The electoral law in New Zealand was changed with the adoption of MMP to require that parties use “democratic procedures” in constructing their lists, and that these procedures include participation of party members.

The parties differ, however, in the all-important process of determining who gets ranked where on the list, which is fundamental to determining who ultimately gets elected. The Greens hold a plebiscite of the entire party membership to determine this using a mail ballot. Labour does it through something called a moderating committee, whose membership has been highly contentious in recent years, as all parts of the party, as you can imagine, want to be included on that committee. Currently, its membership is quite large. Many, including the party president, relate that they think it's too unwieldy. It includes MPs, regional representatives, Maori representatives, and representatives from the party's many sectors, including youth, Rainbow Labour, trade unions, women, and Pacific islanders. Both Labour and the Greens have rules aimed at ensuring that the representation of many of these same groups is provided for in high positions on the list, whereas the National Party does not.

Our parties would have to grapple with these issues and construct an appropriate process should we adopt closed-list MMP. You, as MPs, would have to decide how prescriptive you wanted Parliament to be in this regard, if at all, and whether or not it requires something like democratic procedures. This would be a dramatic shift from the current status quo.

In STV there are multi-member districts. If we take the example of Ireland, there are three to five deputies per district. In the major parties, the locals hold nominating conventions similar to those in your parties, but they operate under rather expansive instructions from the centre, concerning how many they can nominate and where in the electorate geographically the candidates chosen will come from. Increasingly, parties are issuing a gender directive from the centre, as well. This has proven, in some cases, to be highly contentious, creating strong tensions between local party members and associations and central party officials, as locals often wish to nominate more candidates than the centre permits. The logic of the system is that you don't nominate as many candidates as there will be MPs, or TDs, as they call them, from the electorate. The locals wish to do this in a rather unfettered fashion.

● (0910)

Our parties would have to determine who would have the authority to make these decisions—it might be national, regional, or provincial—and how expansive any directives to the local associations would be.

With respect to government formation, under MMP or STV, it is highly likely we would end up with multi-party governance, and perhaps in AV as well. This, of course, requires negotiation among the parties—typically, though not always, post-election—to reach a coalition agreement. The question of relevance here is who in the party would have the authority to commit to such an accord. There's considerable variance in this regard.

Some of the Irish parties, Fianna Fáil and the Greens, for example, require a special party congress after an election to approve any coalition agreement. Others, such as the New Zealand National Party, require approval from the party's national executive as well as the parliamentary leadership.

If we were to end up in a highly fragmented system, which could well be the case under either of these electoral systems, government formation could prove very difficult, but at a minimum, parties would have to decide who has the authority to make these deals. Leadership selection is not something we typically think of in relation to the electoral system, but it comes into play as a result of multiparty governance. In all three of the countries I've taken examples from, we've witnessed cases where one of the parties in a coalition government exercises influence over leadership selection in another party.

In Australia, for example, when Liberal Prime Minister Harold Holt was presumed dead, the candidate who was the favourite to replace him, William McMahon, who was serving as treasurer in the Liberal government and had widespread support within his party, was vehemently opposed by the junior coalition partner, the Country Party. The Country Party threatened to withdraw its support for the Liberal Party if Mr. McMahon was chosen as leader. He ultimately had to withdraw from the contest so that the Liberals could maintain their governing position.

Similarly, in recent Fianna Fáil governments, two party leaders, both serving as Taoiseach, or prime minister, at the time, Mr. Haughey and Mr. Reynolds, were dumped after support parties in government—in one case, the Progressive Democrats; in another, Labour—threatened to withdraw their support. Both leaders still had support in their own parliamentary caucus, but in order to remain in government they were removed.

In New Zealand we have seen it work the other way. National Party Prime Minister John Key has threatened to remove a smaller support party, ACT New Zealand, from his coalition if they went ahead with plans to remove and replace their leader.

What we find is something that is largely unprecedented, I suspect, in the Canadian case: parties in coalition with one another influencing leadership selection in the other party. This could prove particularly difficult in the Canadian case, since the authority for both leadership selection and removal is vested in our extra-parliamentary parties. In all of these cases, the parliamentary party was able to make the change quickly because it had that authority. I suspect, if we were to go down this road, it could challenge the current practice of giving the extra-parliamentary party the authority to select and remove leaders.

The fourth and final area of party democracy I'll mention is election campaigning. In both STV and in open-list MMP, general elections include intra-party competition, which our parties would have to learn to manage.

In MMP of the New Zealand variety, we've seen a shift of emphasis away from ridings to regional and/or national campaigns. The number of seats a party wins is almost fully determined by its share of the party vote, not how it performs in the electorates or ridings. Nonetheless, local party organizations, and particularly incumbent electorate MPs, want to run vibrant local campaigns, often at the expense of maximizing the more important party vote.

New Zealand Labour in particular has struggled with this. In recent party reforms, Labour created something called regional hubs, for election purposes, in an attempt to shift resources toward the party vote campaign, but this was not done without considerable tension between locals and the centre, since the allocation of campaign resources is essentially a zero-sum game.

There are also implications in AV. In Australia, parties issue how-to-vote cards indicating how they want their voters to rank lower preferences. Deals have to be made among the parties in this regard. Sometimes this is straightforward but not always, and it can result in tensions between local party organization candidates and the centre.

● (0915)

For example, in 2016 an incumbent Labour MP in the Melbourne area, Michael Danby, issued his own local how-to-vote cards asking his voters to direct their second preferences to the Liberals over the Greens. In the same electorate, the central party, the central campaign, issued cards favouring the Greens over the Liberals as the second choice of Labour voters, so voters received conflicting information. There are often tensions in this regard among locals, state party organizations, and the national campaign.

To conclude, the point of all this is to say that there are many collateral effects of electoral system change that need to be considered and are often overlooked. Also, at a minimum, time needs to be set aside for our parties to grapple with these issues in advance of any election run under a different electoral system. Otherwise, I believe we risk a considerable shift of authority away from our EDAs towards the party centre.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Professor.

We'll go now to Ms. Lacroix, and Ms. Webb, please, for 10 minutes.

Ms. Madeleine Webb (Advocacy Coordinator, Canadian Federation of University Women): Good morning, Mr. Chair and committee members.

[*Translation*]

Thank you for inviting us to appear this morning.

[*English*]

My name is Maddie Webb. I'm here representing the Canadian Federation of University Women, where I am the advocacy coordinator. With me today is Sheila Lacroix, a member of our Leaside–East York club, who spearheaded our policy on proportional representation.

The Canadian Federation of University Women is a non-partisan, voluntary, self-funded organization with over 100 clubs and almost 9,000 members across Canada. Since our founding in 1919, we have been working to improve the status of women and to promote human rights, public education, social justice, and peace. We hold special consultative status with the United Nations and belong to the education committee of the Canadian Commission for UNESCO. We are the largest affiliate of Graduate Women International, which represents women worldwide. The CFUW is also a member of the Every Voter Counts Alliance.

Our members strongly believe in the importance of voting at every level. Our clubs across Canada initiate, engage in, and promote activities to educate Canadians about the democratic process. Several of our clubs have spearheaded incredibly successful get-out-the-vote campaigns, which have increased education and voter turnout in their respective constituencies.

We commend the members of the committee for dedicating so much time and energy to investigating the best way forward for Canada's electoral system. In light of Prime Minister Trudeau's comments yesterday, we'd like to reiterate the urgency of changing our electoral system to make it more representative. After years of independent studies, research, and debate, it's clear that Canadians want to see a change from our first-past-the-post system. The question now is, which system will represent Canadians and result in representative elections?

We urge the government to adopt a model of proportional representation. Proportional representation, or PR, is the most accurate way to ensure that votes cast are translated into representation. Plurality systems such as first past the post and alternative vote do not accurately reflect votes cast by Canadians.

Across the country, first past the post results in false majorities and wasted votes. Plurality systems favour regional parties and large parties with geographically concentrated support, while smaller parties with more diffuse support are under-represented. This is evident in Canadian federal election results. Since World War I, only four governments have been true majorities winning more than 50% of the popular vote.

These problems are not solved by alternative vote, or by ranked ballot, another majority plurality system. Simply put, proportional representation will provide a fair reflection of how Canadians cast their votes. Decades of research, the findings of more than a dozen committees, commissions, and assemblies, and a long history of success in the world's top democracies strongly suggest that PR is the best option for Canada.

As a women's organization, we are invested in the empowerment of women, both to vote and to run for office. In a plurality system, women and minorities are less likely to be on the ballot. It's not because they're not electable; it's because in the nomination process parties have historically favoured white male candidates as the best choice for the winner-take-all competition. White men are often considered to be a more acceptable candidate, and thus there's a disincentive to choose women to run.

Despite the fact that women are in fact a majority in almost every country in the world, they see abysmal representation in their governments. In PR systems, indigenous people, minority groups, and women have a greater chance of being included through party lists of multi-member districts. In fact, party lists can be “zippered”, alternating men and women. Lists give parties incentives to include candidates who appeal to a cross-section of the electorate. Parties can also develop quotas for women candidates.

If you simply glance at the three remaining major western democracies using first past the post—Canada, the U.K., and the U.S.—none has broken the mark of even 30% of seats for female representation. However, a quick look at the western democracies using some form of PR shows that their percentages of women go well beyond the 30% mark and upwards of 40%. PR systems tend to elect up to 8% more women than other systems.

In the 2015 election, 62.6% of Canadian voters voted for parties that campaigned for electoral reform. This fact, plus the findings of this committee and past public and expert input, should provide the legitimacy required to move forward at this time. There's enough expertise in Canada to develop a made-in-Canada system. Canadians, with appropriate education, will adapt to the voting system of PR, as did the citizens of most countries in the western world. We have a historic opportunity here to turn years of debate, research, and waiting into a fair and representative electoral system.

● (0920)

I hope I've highlighted the great pitfalls of our winner-take-all, first-past-the-post system, which neither serves nor represents Canadians. Plurality majority systems, such as alternative vote or ranked ballot, fail to overcome the shortcomings of first past the post.

Proportional representation is the obvious choice for an open democracy, to achieve accurate representation and fair political outcomes.

Thank you.

The Chair: Ms. Lacroix, will you be speaking as well?

Ms. Sheila Lacroix (Member, Canadian Federation of University Women): No. Our comments have been covered.

Thank you.

The Chair: The way we proceed is that we have a round of questioning, where each member is allotted time to engage with the witnesses. I think we can manage seven minutes per member. I would ask the members to be very aware of the time, as Ms. May is. I don't know how she does it.

We have to be a little stricter than we had to be when we had more open-ended meetings. We have to end at 10:45, so I would ask you not to launch into a new subject or something very involved with only 30 seconds left. If you could be aware of that, I would appreciate it.

We'll start with Mrs. Romanado, for seven minutes, please.

Mrs. Sherry Romanado: Thank you very much.

[*Translation*]

Thank you very much for being here this morning.

[*English*]

I'd like to thank you all for your participation. To the class that's here from Carleton University, thank you for being here this morning. We have some future MPs in the room, I'm pretty sure.

My first question will be for Mr. Bozinoff.

I read with great interest your submission regarding the recent poll you did. It was an interesting question you asked, whether Canadians could describe different forms of electoral systems. Of course, a good majority claimed they could. When prompted to explain the current system, very few were able to, which, to me, is indicative of the fact that there is not a lot of substantive knowledge about what we are trying to achieve, in terms of what system we currently have in place, what problem we are trying to address, and what some possible solutions could be.

What would you say would be a requirement in order for us to pursue changing the electoral system, given the fact that those who claim to be very aware are not as aware as we would hope them to be? Can you elaborate?

● (0925)

Mr. Lorne Bozinoff: We need to really think about the complexity of some of these ideas. In the other testimony today, some of those systems sound extremely complicated to me. We may have the simplest system right now, and people are unaware of a lot of the details of that. I made opening comments about making sure there is consensus and collaboration, and part of that is based on the assumption that the public knows what we are talking about, but they really don't know, yet, exactly what is being discussed. They are very unaware of the different systems, as our survey data has suggested.

You can ask people a question and they'll give you an answer, but you are never sure that they actually understand what you are asking them. We have to be very careful when we see survey results and questions about preferences. Do they even know what they are talking about? Right now, I don't think the public is there. I am not sure it's a good thing to come forward with a recommendation and ask the public for input, when the public does not understand what it is providing input on. That's just a warning. This is a kind of beltway issue to most people, to use a U.S. term. It's a Hill issue. It hasn't really resonated with the general population.

Mrs. Sherry Romanado: Thank you.

On that note, you just mentioned that our current system is probably the simplest one to understand. In a Broadbent report on the top five goals of a voting system, 55% said it was important that the ballot be simple and easy to understand. The issue of simplicity is one of our guiding principles. I thank you for that.

I'll now move on to Professor Cross.

You brought forward a wealth of information that we hadn't heard before. I really appreciate your participation this morning.

One thing you mentioned was that under an MMP system, there is a shift from ridings to a more regional focus. At the local level, you are a citizen, and you have specific issues that you want your member of Parliament to address. You want to make sure that your representative is focused on local issues—which is an issue in every campaign—but who actually represents you could be decided somewhere else.

Say you are in Longueuil–Charles-LeMoyne, my riding, and you think the most important thing is social housing. The party that you want in is going to focus on that, but because of the national vote, that gets changed. How would you feel, as a local citizen, when decisions regarding who is going to represent you can be made at a national rather than a local level? Can you elaborate, please?

Prof. William Cross: We're using New Zealand as an example of MMP, and of course, it's important to acknowledge that there are many variants. When we talk about an electoral system, the details really do matter.

Local voters have two votes, right? They get to vote for the person they want to be their local MP and for the party they want to govern, separately, and we see that in many cases they split those votes. Using the example of Auckland Central, a downtown Auckland riding, in the last election Labour received 44% of the MP vote, the electorate vote. They lost in a very close race to a National incumbent, but they only received 22% of the party vote. This is really important, because it's the party vote share that determines how many seats they end up with in the legislature, not the electorate vote.

From the party's perspective, they want to try to maximize the party vote, but you can imagine that the local candidates and the local members in Auckland Central and other places, especially if they're incumbents, want resources to get them re-elected to be the local electorate MP. It has created real tension in the party. That's why they've just moved—it'll be used in the next election for the first time—to these sort of regional hubs, where they hope to put a lot more resources and emphasis not on the local electorate but sort of regionally, to try to get people to vote for the party to maximize their share of the vote on that part of the ballot.

● (0930)

Mrs. Sherry Romanado: Madam Webb, thank you for being here.

Last night we actually had a vote in the House on having parties receive reimbursements depending on how many women are on the ballot and so on. I think it's incredibly important that we have more women representatives in Parliament. I'm delighted that this side of the table has two women sitting at this committee.

The majority of us on this side actually abstained from that vote last night, because we wanted to make sure that this committee could do the work it is doing to look at ways to get more women to run. I think the nomination process absolutely needs to be revamped.

Thank you.

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

Mr. Reid.

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

I wanted to start by directing some questions to the representatives of Forum Research, Dr. Bozinoff and Mr. Schatten.

The first question I have is whether you have posted the results of this. It sounds like this is a new poll and these are new results you're giving to us. Have they been posted on your website?

Mr. William Schatten: Yes, I believe they have. If not, then they will be this evening.

Mr. Scott Reid: Thank you.

You went through a series of questions you asked and gave the answers to them. In July, you posted on your website a poll you had done that asked, "Do you agree or disagree Canada should have a national referendum on electoral reform before any changes are made to the way we elect our MPs?"

Did you replicate that question this time around?

Mr. William Schatten: That wasn't included in the most recent poll, no.

Mr. Scott Reid: Okay.

In that poll, you broke it down, as you well know, as this is your poll. You said that 65% of Canadians felt that there should be a referendum. Broken down by party, a majority in every party favoured it: 79% of Conservative supporters; 56% of Liberals; 75% of New Democrats; 63% of Greens; and 74% of Bloc supporters.

That indicates to some degree a consensus on that question. I won't ask you about that further, but I would ask whether you are finding that there is cross-party consensus on the other questions you're asking. That is to say, are we divided in a partisan manner among parties in the way we treat the importance of the issue, or is there a general consensus, as there appears to be, on this matter?

Mr. William Schatten: There are some nuances in different elements of this topic. For example, we asked a series of important issue questions on the most recent poll. Electoral reform was on there. The economy was on there, and marijuana legalization and a few others. There were some nuances in terms of how those were ranked that divided on party lines. I sort of alluded to that previously.

The importance of electoral reform is fairly high across the board. However, it's much higher for the NDP than it is for the Conservatives. The Liberals and the Greens fell somewhere in the middle, but that's just on importance. In terms of whether Canada should change its electoral system, across the board, regardless of party, there's pretty strong support for that. About half of Canadians felt that the system should be changed.

In terms of issue importance, there are some nuances, but in terms of whether it should be changed, there's consistency and agreement across the board.

Mr. Scott Reid: When you say that people give high importance to electoral reform, it sounds as if what you're saying is that they would give electoral reform a high place on the policy agenda above some of the other things the government could be directing its attention to. Is that what you mean when you say that?

● (0935)

Mr. William Schatten: Yes. I don't have the full table in front of me right now, but the economy was the highest across the board. The average score was eight out of nine. Electoral reform fell somewhere in the middle. The other ones were—these are averages right now—climate change at 6.8; relations with Canada's first nations, 6.4; electoral reform, 5.5; Syrian refugees, 5.3; and marijuana legalization, 5.0. All of these are relatively high.

Mr. Scott Reid: Okay.

There's a different way in which the electoral system would be seen as being important by people. I wanted to run through an impressionistic view I've had of public opinion, based on our hearings, reading your polls and the polls of other firms, and the consultations we've been engaged in. I want to see if you think, based on the data you have available to you, whether I'm potentially getting close to the mark or missing the mark.

It seems to me, first of all, that Canadians as a whole, both those who think electoral reform is a good idea and those who think it's a bad idea, those who would rank it high and those who would rank it low, all of them regard the electoral system as being of foundational importance, effectively part of the Constitution in the sense that the British refer to the Constitution as a foundational part of the system, whether it has protection under our amending formula or not. Second, there is not an actual majority in favour of change. There's a wide division. Third, among those who do want change, proportionality is strongly favoured over non-proportional options. Effectively, those who want change want proportional representation, but within that subset of the population, there is no strong preference for one or another of the proportional models.

Does that sound roughly like an accurate view of where Canadians are, from what you can see?

Mr. William Schatten: Yes. We didn't ask which system Canada should change to. We asked, in their view, which system is best for Canada? When we phrased the question that way, first past the post is the most popular, with 42%; proportional representation follows, at 35%; and as I said, ranked ballot, at 23%. Asking which system they thought was best for Canada, the majority felt first past the post was best. When you ask which system Canada should change to, which we didn't in the most recent one, it's possible that a PR system comes out as the most favourable alternative. That could be true.

With regard to your other points, this issue is fairly high in importance.

In terms of Canada changing its electoral system, it's not the majority. It's 48%, about half of Canadians. A third disagree that it should change, and about a fifth are in the middle somewhere, unsure or don't have an opinion.

Mr. Scott Reid: Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you.

We'll move to Mr. Cullen now.

Mr. Nathan Cullen: Thank you very much.

Thank you to our witnesses for being here, especially with the pollsters here. This is like catnip for politicians. You know that. We want to dive in and challenge.

I have a few questions for you, but I want to start with Ms. Webb for a moment.

I was just looking through some stats and some quotes. Just this week the minister was asked about an effort to get more women nominated. She said that in the House they're not interested in just having more women run. They want more women winning. I found that statement confusing.

You said in your testimony that there's no evidence that when women get nominated that there's inherent sexism, that the voters are not electing them to office. Did I get that right?

Ms. Madeleine Webb: Yes.

Mr. Nathan Cullen: Okay. Canada is ranked 64th right now in the world, behind—

Ms. Madeleine Webb: Yes.

Mr. Nathan Cullen: —Afghanistan and Iraq and South Sudan and other great democracies. The notion then would be, if we know that once women get nominated they do as well as anybody else—

Ms. Madeleine Webb: They do better.

Mr. Nathan Cullen: They do better...?

Ms. Madeleine Webb: Yes.

● (0940)

Mr. Nathan Cullen: Oh, okay. Then the major barrier would be getting women nominated, because once they get nominated, they do, well, better.

Ms. Madeleine Webb: Yes.

Mr. Nathan Cullen: Okay.

Well, that's strange then.

Ms. Madeleine Webb: Do you want me to answer? Can I say something?

Mr. Nathan Cullen: Yes, sure.

Ms. Madeleine Webb: I think we'd both like to talk, but I will give some generalities. I don't have the exact stats in front of me, but women do get elected slightly more often than men do, once they're nominated. It's the nomination process that really discriminates against women because of the majority system that we have. With the plurality system that we have, parties—and people who vote within parties, so party members—tend to want to elect somebody they think will appeal to the most voters, and that tends to end up being white men.

Mr. Nathan Cullen: Right. There's that built-in bias within the membership.

Ms. Madeleine Webb: Yes. It's once they're nominated that women do quite well.

I think Sheila would like to say something, as well.

Mr. Nathan Cullen: Great. Okay.

Ms. Sheila Lacroix: I would just like to address regionalism. In some areas, some parties have no hope of being elected at certain points of time, and first past the post definitely encourages regionalism. Even if you have women candidates, and I can think of many examples, if they're in a region where the party—

Mr. Nathan Cullen: The “no hope” seats.

Ms. Sheila Lacroix: —is not popular, there's still no hope, because I know some excellent women who have not been voted in.

Mr. Nathan Cullen: This is the two parts. If we want to get Canada...because we had this big election last year, a year ago yesterday. Many Canadians would perceive that with respect to women things changed dramatically, but the percentage of women in the House of Commons went up 1%, from 25% to 26%.

Ms. Sheila Lacroix: That's right. You have maybe more on the cabinet, but fewer in the committees—

Mr. Nathan Cullen: Right. Who?

Ms. Sheila Lacroix: —like the medically assisted death committee, I think, only had one woman.

Mr. Nathan Cullen: I'm in a state of confusion and mourning to hear the democratic reform minister say we're not just interested in getting women nominated. What you're telling us is that's the biggest barrier right now, plus the system in which we count. We know that proportionality helps women get elected once in.

We heard last night from people in New Zealand and the U.K. that under proportional systems those so-called “safe seats” or “no win seats”, depending on your point of view, diminished dramatically. Every party has to vie, and every party has a shot across the country, so it's no longer just nominating women to get your stats up.

I was looking at the statistics for how nominations went. Just in the last campaign my Conservative friends nominated 20% women, it was 28% from the Bloc, a cracking 31% from the Liberals, the Greens got up to 39%, and we did 43%. We have policies within our party to help women get nominated specifically for this.

Mr. Bozinoff or Mr. Schatten, I'm not sure who will answer this. One of the things you said in your survey was, “We have found electoral reform notoriously difficult to poll, because explaining each system adequately is challenging. We found, when the simple facts were presented, PR is favoured...because it sounds the most representative.”

What I'm confused by is the notion that you went on to explain the drawbacks, and then PR went down. Is that what you were saying in your report?

Mr. William Schatten: We asked if individuals could describe the different systems, and that's where PR came out on top with 63%, indicating that they felt comfortable describing what that type of system was, followed by first past the post at 54%. Then we asked which electoral system was best for Canada and which they preferred as their first choice, it was first past the post at 42%, followed by PR at 35%.

Mr. Nathan Cullen: Right. Did you explain the distortion effects under first past the post? Did you explain that women tend to get elected less under first past the post?

Mr. William Schatten: Yes. The first section we talked about was describing these systems and then which system Canada had. That was unprompted. There were no descriptions on what these systems are. We were just trying to get a perception of knowledge on these. When we went into preference on these systems, we gave a very short, basic summary description of what these were. You can't really give a knowledge transfer, or a civics lesson, when conducting a survey. The whole survey results indicate that there is a knowledge gap for Canadians.

Mr. Nathan Cullen: The idea is that with that knowledge gap over something so fundamental that affects people's lives, this is something that we have to battle with. Everybody says education's important.

We would say something, though, like a trade deal affects everybody's life, such as TPP or CETA. I would be curious if we went into the field and said to Canadians, “Tell us about CETA. Tell us what TPP is going to mean for food security, or energy security, or drugs, or pharmaceuticals”. Things affect people's lives that we do here every day.

Yesterday, one of the presenters from New Zealand said that you don't contract out the hard decisions in politics. We get elected to do things. Some of them are hard and some of them are difficult. I'm surprised, because someone's been kicking around.... What was the percentage of awareness that this is happening at all?

● (0945)

Mr. William Schatten: About half of Canadians were aware this committee existed.

Mr. Nathan Cullen: Wow. I'd love to put us up against the transport committee right now or the agriculture committee. I'm impressed. That's wonderful news.

The Chair: It's not bad, actually, when you think about it.

Mr. Nathan Cullen: Isn't it good, Chair?

The Chair: Yes.

Ms. May

Ms. Elizabeth May: Is it my turn?

Thank you, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: Oh, I'm sorry. It was Mr. Thériault.

[*Translation*]

I do apologize, Mr. Thériault. Go ahead.

Mr. Luc Thériault (Montcalm, BQ): I will think about it and decide whether I accept your apology, Mr. Chair.

Ladies, gentlemen and students, I hope our debates fascinate you.

I will start with you, Ms. Webb.

So you know where I stand when I ask my questions, I'll tell you that our Prime Minister was just a babe when I was an activist in a feminist movement. I am for gender equity in the nominations, but I advocate more for real representation of women in Parliament.

I have a very simple question for you: if you had to choose between keeping our voting system, accompanied by coercive measures to encourage gender equity in the nominations, and a mixed member proportional voting system with incentives, which would you choose?

Ms. Madeleine Webb: Are you talking about choosing between the rules for—

Mr. Luc Thériault: Between the current voting system, to which we would add coercive measures to encourage equal nominations, and the compensatory mixed member proportional voting system, which would include incentives, which do you prefer?

[*English*]

Ms. Madeleine Webb: I'm going to respond in English, just because I don't know all the terms in French, but thank you for your question.

As a representative of CFUW I can say that we do not have a policy specifically to address that, but right now before this committee we are asking for change. I think what we see is that we can give incentives to have more women elected or more women nominated. Some parties take that upon themselves.

In general, I think it's a good idea to encourage parties to nominate more women. However, for real change, if we really want to see more women elected and more minorities elected, we need to change the electoral system. I would not say that we're advocating specifically for mixed-member proportional. We are advocating for a Canadian version of proportional representation, whatever form that might take.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Luc Thériault: Okay, I understand the nuance.

Mr. Bozinoff and Mr. Schatten, you said that people who say they know what Canadians want may be speaking carelessly by playing the representation card. I am a duly elected member of Parliament. We have a representative democracy. I do not claim to know what voting system all voters want.

I know what I want and what my party wants. We want the voting system to change and a form of proportionality introduced. We prefer the compensatory mixed member proportional voting system. However, we don't want just any model of this voting system, and we don't want it to be applied haphazardly.

We need to take the time to do things properly. For that, we have to let the Prime Minister out of the straitjacket we have put him in by saying that it would be the last election with the current voting system. I don't think he knew what he was saying and had no knowledge of what was required to transform things.

Suppose our committee moves on to a second step that would involve developing a model and continuing to consult all voters to make them understand the differences between the proposed voting system and the current voting system. People would then be better informed and could settle the debate. In that case, would you be in favour of a referendum on the issue?

People have told us that a referendum wouldn't be necessary because we are the representatives of the people. If a referendum isn't necessary to change the voting system, it isn't necessary either to maintain the status quo. Right now, one is as good as the other.

If we don't want to decide for the people and if we want to rise above partisanship, I think a referendum would be necessary and could be held during the next election.

To interest people in this issue, shouldn't we first have a clear model, rather than keep the status quo and continue the consultations?

● (0950)

[*English*]

Mr. Lorne Bozinoff: I'm going to respond in English.

The public generally is in favour of referendums. They like the idea because the idea is that they're going to be consulted on something directly. We did a poll a month ago and found that 65% favour a referendum. That's not a surprise. People tend to say that the public should be consulted.

I'm not convinced that they would want two referendums though. The counter-argument is about the cost of these things, and it gets into the millions of dollars sometimes. We sometimes hear that kind of push-back. I'm not convinced that there's interest in two referendums, but I think there would be a lot of interest in one referendum once the committee has made its recommendation and we have a concrete option.

You know, there's a lot of fluidity in these results because the details are still unknown. We don't know what the choice is going to be. We tested three options. Well, I don't think a referendum is going to involve three options. To really get a solid handle on this, the public would need to know what the idea is.

Going back to Mr. Cullen's point about the details and the trade agreements and so forth, I think that once the public knows exactly what the details are, they'll understand the implications through the dialogue in the run-up. They'll understand the pros and cons. They will then know what it means to them, I think. They will know—

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Lorne Bozinoff: I think they will be able to answer in a more educated manner whether or not they're in favour of this system, or to say if it's the new system versus the old system.

The Chair: Thank you.

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

Ms. Elizabeth May: Thank you very much, Chair.

Thank you to the committee and to all of our panel members who are here today. It's been a very good discussion. I'm also glad to welcome a political science class here in Parliament for this really critical discussion.

We were kind of teasing about Mr. Cullen's answer to the question. When Mr. Bricker was here, his polling numbers said that in August, 3% of Canadians were aware of our committee. We have vaulted to 50% of Canadians being aware of this committee, and if you turn around you'll see that the tables reserved for media are remarkably vacant, as they have been consistently in almost all of our hearings. I'm amazed that we got up to 50% since we're in a media blackout zone.

I want to identify myself as a member of the Canadian Federation of University Women, and I will try to come back to you with some more questions, but I first wanted to address Professor Cross.

I'm grateful to you for focusing on an area we hadn't heard about, but I wonder if I could bring your attention back to something we have heard about, especially since you were an adviser. Perhaps you could describe your role with the New Brunswick Commission on Electoral Reform in a bit more detail. Would you still hold to the recommendation the commission had then for mixed-member proportional?

● (0955)

Prof. William Cross: I spent about 18 months as a director of research for the commission working in conjunction with David McLaughlin who you have heard from. He was the deputy minister at the time. We had a small commission, ultimately of eight. We lost one; we started with nine. My role was really to provide the information and the research that the committee used on an ongoing basis during our meetings. We did a lot of public consultation as well across the province, and then ultimately wrote the report.

My view on electoral system change is that it is something one has to approach very cautiously, of course, with awareness of all the potential implications. In the New Brunswick case, the commission did a very thoughtful job and created a regional mixed-member proportional representation system, or N.B. MMP, that was tailored to the context of New Brunswick. Of course, it is unique in our confederation, with its two linguistic communities at the provincial level. A lot of regional dynamics had to be considered. The commission recommended a system that was appropriate to the province at that time. The new Liberal government has just engaged a new process. We'll see where that ends up.

Ms. Elizabeth May: The second part of my question is whether you still think that mixed-member proportional would be right for New Brunswick. Do you have any particular recommendation, given how much time you spent working on and thinking about this area in your own work as research chair for parliamentary democracy? Do you have a specific preference yourself on the electoral reform this committee should recommend? How would you suggest we prioritize the different values that we have to consider in making that recommendation?

Prof. William Cross: Sure. You're right to begin from a position of values. I think back to the dictionary definition of reform, which is to change something for the better. We have to be very careful that we understand the full implications of the changes we consider and that we are making it better.

I was just listening to the conversation about gender. I've just written a paper that will be in the Canadian Journal of Political Science shortly on candidate nomination and gender in the 2015 election. It's true that it is a principal obstacle, but if the intent is to get more women into Parliament, there are lots of other ways of doing that short of changing the electoral system if we have a real commitment to do it, which we should.

Changing the electoral system, in and of itself, doesn't guarantee that. People cherry-pick examples, right? Ireland, which has a more proportional system, has fewer women in their lower house, the Dáil Éireann, than we do. It just doubled in the last election earlier this year, and that was the result of tying campaign finance reimbursements to increasing the number of women nominated, which is something we could do if that were really what we wanted to do and we had that as a strong incentive.

I would just say, to answer your question, that I don't have a preferred position on this. My advice to the committee would be to go slowly. I get concerned, and that's one of the things I was trying to address. If we move very quickly and say that the next election is going to be under MMP or AV or STV, and we don't allow time for political parties to adjust to that, I think it could result in a real power grab toward the centre of our parties and away from internal party democracy where members and EDAs have an important role.

It doesn't have to end up that way, but if we don't leave time for the parties to consider those things and have a thoughtful conversation about them, I think that's where we would end up.

Ms. Elizabeth May: I think you'd agree with me that over the last number of decades, or certainly since the early 1970s, when for the first time a political party's name was put on the ballot and, for the first time ever, political party leaders had to sign off on nominations, it would be naive to suggest that the current process of nominating candidates across Canada in the major parties is free from top-down political control.

Would you agree that there's been a trend towards greater political control in the centre since we've put the names of parties on the ballots with the candidates' names?

● (1000)

Prof. William Cross: Well, it's complicated. Joey Smallwood, when he was premier in Newfoundland, issued a press release that listed who all the federal candidates would be for the Liberal Party in Newfoundland.

It has flowed back and forth. A decade ago, both of the parties, Mr. Harper's party and the Liberals, renominated all incumbents by fiat, essentially, from the centre. They backtracked from that, right? There was a real push-back.

As we all know, there is interference from the centre. It's contentious, but we just need to be careful in thinking about how that would play out under different systems.

Ms. Elizabeth May: I'll go to Mr. Bozinoff.

Just to clarify, on your page 8, in table 1, is this actually the description that was used on the IVR system? Is this all they were told about the different systems? If I'm correct in finding that this reflects only to the voter how each MP has been elected, it doesn't say anything about how, under first past the post, 39% of the vote gives you the majority. The proportionality impact is not riding by riding in its importance; it's the makeup of Parliament as a whole, which is completely absent from this description in table 1.

The Chair: Very briefly, please, because we are up against a time constraint.

Mr. Lorne Bozinoff: Yes, those are descriptions we used.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Aldag, please.

Mr. John Aldag (Cloverdale—Langley City, Lib.): Good morning to our panellists. This has been another great morning. As we go through this, I'm always surprised at the new testimony we get each day. Each of you has brought us some new insight today, so that's really appreciated.

I did want to start with one small correction on a statement that was made previously when a discussion was happening about committees and how in this Parliament it's difficult to have full representation by women.

The example of the medical assistance in dying committee was given. I sat on that committee. I just want to indicate that it wasn't just one woman for the entire committee. The Liberals had two women who participated throughout. The NDP had one, Madam Sansoucy, who participated consistently throughout the process. Also, the Senate actually had two of five, because it was a special joint committee. There was actually fairly good representation.

We see other examples. My colleague Ms. Romanado sits on two committees, whereas I sit on one. Sometimes women have to work harder, but we can get that representation.

Voices: Oh, oh!

Mrs. Sherry Romanado: Always.

Mr. John Aldag: Or at least be present more—

Mrs. Sherry Romanado: Work harder.

Mr. John Aldag: Okay.

I'm going to start my questioning with you, Professor Cross. I found your discussion really interesting. I'll tell you where my mind has gone this morning. We've had discussions about different forms of government that arise from proportional systems and about this idea of coalition, and I've poked around with other witnesses about what kinds of policy compromises would be made in the sense that some small parties can have a unwieldy amount of weight or a disproportionate amount of weight.

Because of their being able to broker within the power scheme of things in Parliament, they could end up with a stronger voice than they might have had otherwise, but I had never considered this in the sense of party leadership selection. You've given the example of Australia, so I'm sitting here and looking across the table, where we have the Conservatives currently starting their leadership search and the NDP about to embark on the same process. I'm thinking, wow, so you're saying that Ms. May, with a perhaps slightly expanded Green Party, could actually dictate to the Conservatives who they're going to select as their leader, and the Bloc could actually get involved with the NDP and determine who is going to be ruled out or not.

Could that actually happen in the Canadian context? I find that absolutely fascinating.

Prof. William Cross: Well, in all three of those countries, Australia, New Zealand, and Ireland, this has happened.

In the 1990s, two Fianna Fáil prime ministers—taoiseachs—were removed from office because the supporting parties in the coalition, in one case, the Progressive Democrats, and in the other, the Labour Party, said they would not continue to support the party in power unless Fianna Fáil removed and replaced their leader, which they did. There had been some scandals that had arisen.

Now, as I mentioned quickly, in all of these cases the parliamentary party has the authority to remove the leader. That's not the case in Canada, unless you were to adopt the reform act. One of my concerns would be just what you suggest. Let's pretend that the Conservatives are in a coalition with the New Democrats, and the New Democrats demand that the Conservatives remove their leader in order to continue to have their support.

Voices: Oh, oh!

Prof. William Cross: How does the Conservative Party do that through an extra-parliamentary process? It would take a long time. As a corollary of fact, that could result in adoption of the reform act, a sort of unexpected implication of electoral system change.

● (1005)

Mr. John Aldag: That's really interesting.

The other piece of it—and I don't know if you could comment on it—gets into our structure within the House of Commons. Right now you have to have 12 members in order to have official party status, to participate on committees, and to get other things. In this kind of coalition system, when two parties that don't meet that threshold join, are they actually considered one party? Could that trigger additional subsidies and budgets to these smaller parties? Would it get them over that barrier they're up against right now?

Prof. William Cross: In the other countries they continue to be considered independent parties.

Mr. John Aldag: They wouldn't ride on the coattails of the party that had crossed over that threshold. That's very interesting.

You were talking, in your opening comments, about the role of parties. It's this dilemma about how autonomous parties should be in setting their policies compared with Parliament imposing their will on parties.

I go to, as Ms. Romanado mentioned, yesterday's vote. There was a bill before the House that could have provided penalties to parties for not meeting targets. I was weighing where I was going to go with that one, and I ended up abstaining because we are deliberating right now, and I thought it would be premature to do that.

The idea of Parliament imposing its will on parties I think is a dilemma. How do you let the grassroots, which is really the foundation of our democratic system, do the right things? Where do you provide disincentives? Where do you provide the stick, and where do you provide the nudging through positive incentives? I don't know if you have any comments you'd like to offer on that. It is one that I find difficult, the will of Parliament versus the will of parties.

Prof. William Cross: It is a difficult question whether or not parties should be viewed as private organizations. On the other hand, perhaps it's something like public utilities, because they play such an important role in our democracy and receive a significant amount of public funding from the taxpayers.

I testified before the Senate committee on the reform act. When the act was still prescriptive, when it said you had to do these things, that it wasn't left up to the caucuses to decide, I thought it was a terrible idea, because it imposed on our parties a particular set of values and ways they should organize.

For the most part, I think that's best left to the political parties to determine for themselves, although I do think the money that's given can sometimes be used as a carrot. You could incentivize things like increasing the number of women nominated. It is an area where I think we want to move very cautiously. We don't want parties to be creatures or captive of Parliament.

Mr. John Aldag: Is there—

The Chair: Thank you.

We have to move on. Sorry about that. I told you it's a stricter game today because of the time limits.

We'll go to Mr. Richards, please.

Mr. Blake Richards (Banff—Airdrie, CPC): Thanks, Mr. Chair.

Thank you all for being here.

I'll start with Mr. Bozinoff and Mr. Schatten.

I was shocked when I heard you say, when you were asking about the understanding of the various systems.... I understood you to say that the question you asked was “Could you explain it to a friend?” That was a way of determining if there was actual understanding. I was shocked when I heard you say that only 54% could explain first past the post, which is our current system. Then you went on to say that only 40% could identify that first past the post was our current system, so I think that largely explains that.

I'm curious if you've ever polled on explaining our current system. The reason I ask is that obviously 54% is lower than the typical turnout at an election. If they voted in an election, they should understand the system they voted under. I'm just curious about whether you've ever asked that question. Rather than asking about first past the post, have you asked, “Could you explain our current system?” I'm curious about that.

Mr. William Schatten: No. We haven't gone into too much detail in the surveys on describing how our current system works.

Language is important. When the committee makes its decision, and if the government decides to move forward, whether it's through a referendum or through other means, you're going to have to.... There needs to be a public awareness campaign around all of these issues, whatever the decision is. There needs to be some knowledge transfer, some education. This is very indicative of that.

In terms of these individuals, just over half say they could describe what first past the post is, but when provided an example, only 42% would indicate that Canada uses the first-past-the-post system. There are definitely some knowledge gaps there.

● (1010)

Mr. Blake Richards: Yes.

Along the same lines, 52%, I guess, are saying that we should keep our current system. When you asked whether we should change, 48% said they agreed, so that would mean that 52% disagreed, I would assume. That would mean that there would be a large number that would want to keep our current system, I would assume, potentially.

When you asked what their first choice was in terms of systems, 42% said it would be first past the post. That was the highest number, but it's still less than those who indicated that they wouldn't want to change.

I'm curious about how that question was asked. I assume they were given choices of various systems. If someone had said, “our current system”, would that have been considered a valid response and included with the first past the post? I'm just curious about how that would have been conducted.

Mr. Lorne Bozinoff: No, they had to click one of the three options we gave them. They couldn't say, “the current system”. They would have to recognize what the current system is, and maybe they don't know what it is.

Just remember, though, on the knowledge thing, that there's no knowledge test to vote. We don't test people and say, “Gee, you can't vote because you don't know the details of the voting system. You don't know the name of it. You can't describe it to your friend”. They all are going to vote. They're all going to have opinions. There are some “don't knows” in here, but we gave the people three choices, and most of them picked one of those three.

Mr. Blake Richards: I was just curious about it. It stands to reason that if they were able to indicate the current system, it might have made that number higher.

I would agree that there shouldn't be a knowledge test to vote. There have been many who have made that argument when talking about referendums. They say that people wouldn't have enough knowledge or understand enough to vote in a referendum. I just think that's a really arrogant viewpoint. It's unfortunate that some people see it that way.

I want to move on to you, Professor Cross.

You mentioned, and actually, in response to Mr. Aldag's question, it was brought up again, one of the unique challenges that might exist in Canada, and that was in talking about party lists and other parties being able to influence party leadership choices. You explained that because that choice in Canada is done by the extra-parliamentary membership, or the grassroots membership of parties, it would create a unique challenge in terms of issues such as coalitions and party lists and things like that.

I'm curious about whether you have thought much about other unique considerations in looking at a system for Canada. Obviously, Canada is, in many ways, very much different from a lot of other countries. We're one of the largest countries in the world. We're a very sparsely populated, very diverse country. Do you have some suggestions on other considerations we should be thinking about? If a new system were to be created for Canada, we have to think about those unique challenges. Have you thought about what some of those unique challenges might be that we would want to think about?

Prof. William Cross: Sure. I would take just 10 seconds at the beginning to touch on something from a previous conversation. In reading the testimony of some of my colleagues who have appeared before you, I can say, without exaggeration, that I've been shocked by the attitude of some of them that Canadians can't learn about this issue and have an informed opinion on it. I just want to put that on the table.

I think there are a couple of other issues that are important in the Canadian context. One is—

Mr. Blake Richards: I'll just interrupt you. You made that comment, so obviously you have some thoughts on it. Do you think that's an important way to proceed, to give Canadians that option, that choice? You're saying that they could be educated, and I agree.

Prof. William Cross: Yes.

Mr. Blake Richards: We should be making sure that people have the proper education to make a decision.

Prof. William Cross: Sure. Look at the New Zealand example, for instance, where there was that kind of government-funded and initiated educational program. I think with a robust educational process Canadians would be able to understand the basics of what's required. They don't need to understand the Droop quota and how all the transfers might work and things. They would need to know what it would mean to them in terms of how they're represented and who represents them in Parliament.

On the question I think you're asking about a referendum, and I go there hesitantly, since it's become somewhat of a partisan issue, I take Mr. Reid's point. It gets close to being a constitutional issue. It's something fundamental. I think in terms of fairness and Canadians' acceptance of whatever is recommended, and if we have a change, it's important that they don't view it in any way as a partisan exercise. One way to ensure that this is not the perception is to have it be something that is approved of by Canadians. Now, I don't think we need supermajorities or anything of that sort.

● (1015)

The Chair: Thanks.

We'll go to Ms. Sahota, please.

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

Thank you to all the witnesses here today. It's really nice to see everybody in the audience. It's probably one of the bigger crowds we've had in some time.

Ms. Webb, what would you think the paramount reason to move toward a PR system would be for your organization? What would you want to accomplish through that?

Ms. Madeleine Webb: Thank you for your question. That's a great question because I think it's important for us to say we do not support proportional representation only for the reason that it can help women get elected.

I think the most important part of PR is that we think Canadians should go to the ballot box expecting their vote is going to translate into representation. Right now that is not the case. A huge percentage of votes get wasted under a plurality system. I think the biggest reason to move for change is that so many votes don't count right now.

Ms. Ruby Sahota: From all the different presentations, I think Professor Cross has given us some food for thought. That definitely is one of the reasons that comes up most often. Say I've been voting for a party, and they only have a couple of seats. I'm a minority among Canadians in my political view, and I want my minority view to be reflected in the House of Commons. However, we don't think about all the collateral changes and what takes effect after going to a PR system.

Professor Cross, you have given some testimony as to the different changes we could potentially see under different systems. Do you feel Canadians' views would be more reflected in a PR system than they are currently? Would people be able to check off at the ballot box and say this is how I feel, this is my political view, and then expect that to translate into policy in the future? Or do you feel the current system whereby parties go in with a clear mandate, and parties either win and form government, or they don't form government. We don't have a tradition of coalitions here in Canada yet. PR systems may create that.

We've had a lot of testimony about how it may create a co-operative environment. Collaboration could be a good thing, but we've also had testimony to say collaboration could end up causing a lot of parties at times to compromise what they value the most. We've had testimony in Nunavut recently where they have a consensus form of government, saying they don't get a lot done. They can't push through a mandate, and we're seeing frustration at the territorial level.

Could you comment a little on what you get as a result?

Prof. William Cross: There's a lot there.

I think what you're highlighting is that there are competing principles. You need to prioritize what it is you want to accomplish through an electoral system. No system is best, no system is perfect, and no system can accomplish all of these different legitimate objectives of democracy that you point to.

As to the unexpected implications, there are two things I'm not sure the committee has really thought about but I think would be worth putting on the table. First, there is the whole question of executive federalism in Canada and how that works. If we were to move to a system of proportional representation of some sort at the federal level that resulted in coalition governments, and if the rest of the premiers were still elected under first past the post and thus most had majority governments, when they meet, does the Prime Minister or a first minister of health or whatever, does she have the power to negotiate on behalf of her government, or does she have to come back and make sure that she maintains the support of the coalition partners and other parties? I think of what happened with the Meech Lake Accord, which was the first time that legislatures were brought into the constitutional process. After the first ministers came to agreement, it had to be approved by the legislatures, and that's where it fell apart. In respect of federal-provincial negations, this is something that has to be thought through.

Second, if I knew nothing about Canada and you told me about this great country and the demographics and the like and I had lived from coast to coast, I would say, “It doesn't make sense. It's not going to last. Good luck, folks. The centrifugal forces are too great.” Yet, we're about to celebrate the 150th birthday of a country that works and is the envy of people around the world. I think this is in part because we have a tradition of large, brokerage, accommodative parties. If a party wants to get to government, it knows it has to reach out to a lot of Canadians and find the broad centre. This was the incentive for the Progressive Conservatives and the Alliance to merge into a single party.

Under different systems, that incentive wouldn't have been there. They could have continued to be separate parties. Maybe that would have been a good thing or a bad thing. That's sort of a normative judgment, but it has profound implications on the way our democracy works. I think it's so important that we consider what would happen under different systems in the context of Canada, a highly diverse federal system.

● (1020)

Ms. Ruby Sahota: We had a witness testify before this committee who gave a great analogy, which our committee members talked about a little bit. It was about an assignment he did at school. He went in to try to teach PR to the students, and he used a method of ordering pizza. The ballot had different pizzas on it. As a result, under a PR system, everyone got the pizza they wanted. They had some pepperoni and cheese; they had some vegetarian; they had something else.

As other witnesses like yourself have appeared, it seems to me that not everyone in the end would get what they wanted, because that pizza in fact wouldn't be one pepperoni pizza, one vegetarian pizza. You'd have a pizza with anchovies on it, and you'd have a pizza with a mix of a whole bunch of things in the government at the end. Does everyone essentially get exactly what they want, or does everybody get a mismatch of pizza that they're allergic to at the end of the day? I don't know, but it was an interesting analogy.

Do I have—?

The Chair: No, we're really done now.

There's no time to answer the pizza question, unfortunately.

We'll go to Mr. Boulerice.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Alexandre Boulerice: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

I must admit to everyone that this is making me hungry.

I would like to thank the witnesses for being here this morning. I would also like to thank everyone in the room. It's rather unusual, and I am very happy that you are here to listen to our discussions. Welcome.

Mr. Cross, we've had a first-past-the-post system for almost 150 years. We have never known anything else. Yet most other western democracies have a proportional voting system, either mixed member or single transferable vote.

In your opinion, what type of cultural change would a proportional voting system create within the Canadian confederation, particularly during government debates and decision-making?

[*English*]

Prof. William Cross: When I look at our system, beyond gender representation, which I think is a huge issue, and perhaps the representation of other minority groups that are currently disadvantaged and under-represented in our Parliament, when I look over time, I think one of the most troubling things is when we have parliamentary caucuses, particularly on the government side, that don't have representation from particular regions of the country. The Conservative government of Mr. Clark had essentially no one from Quebec, no voices at the cabinet table unless you went through the gymnastics of appointing someone to the Senate. I think that's highly troubling with our system.

When I think about possible alternatives, there is what is sometimes called a parallel system or a non-compensatory system whereby you would have another hundred MPs who would be elected from the regions on some kind of party list, so if the Liberals got 10% of the votes in Alberta, they'd get a few MPs. It wouldn't change things dramatically because it wouldn't be compensatory in the sense that if you did that, all the parties would get a share of those seats and you could still get a majority government. It likely wouldn't affect who ultimately would govern and you could still have a single-party majority government.

To my mind, that's one of the real shortcomings of our system, but of course, it has to be balanced against other things.

It was mentioned earlier that one of the disadvantages of our system is that it favours regional parties. I'm not sure this is a disadvantage. I'm not sure it's at all a bad thing. When there was western alienation in the 1980s and 1990s, our system allowed the Reform Party to have some success and for that voice to be heard inside our Parliament. I'm not sure it's a bad thing if 40% of Quebeckers who are frustrated with this fragile system want to vote for the Bloc Québécois. Our system gives them a voice and the ability to do that.

First past the post isn't the only system that would allow that. Others might as well. People will often point to that as a negative of our system. I'm not quite clear this is the case.

● (1025)

[*Translation*]

Mr. Alexandre Boulerice: Excellent. That's actually a very good point.

Yesterday, Professor Byron Weber Becker showed us some modelling and extrapolations using figures from the last election. It was very interesting. He said that currently in Canada, a political party that obtains 40% of the vote can get between 0 and 338 MPs. In other words, having obtained 40% of the vote, a party may as well not have any elected MPs, should the opponent obtain 50% or 60% of the vote, winning in all the ridings.

Don't you find that there is the possibility for a clear distortion that means that the will of the electorate may be completely flouted, given that the voting system does not translate the percentage of votes into seats?

[*English*]

Prof. William Cross: Yes, and it's not completely hypothetical. In New Brunswick when Frank McKenna won with 60% of the vote, Mr. Hatfield got 40% and no seats in the legislature.

On the other hand, at the federal level and with the regionalization of our system, a party's not going to win 40% of the vote and get zero seats.

I would also caution that it's very dangerous to take past election results and extrapolate them to expose them to some other system because the cast of players would be different, and everybody responds to incentives: voters, parties, interest groups. I think that's a bit of a dangerous game to play, but yes of course, when you get those incredibly lopsided results that don't reflect the popular vote, that is a shortcoming of our system. That was very important in the New Brunswick case that Ms. May mentioned, but also in Prince Edward Island where they had a series of elections in the nineties that returned one or two opposition members.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Alexandre Boulerice: Ms. Webb, in a previous response, you said that in our current system—

[*English*]

so many votes don't count.

[*Translation*]

What do you mean exactly? I have some idea, but I would like to hear you expand on it a little more.

[*English*]

Ms. Madeleine Webb: When I go to the ballot box and vote for my party but that's not the party that 40% of my constituency votes for, if they win in my constituency with that 40% because the 60% is split among a bunch of other parties, then my vote doesn't result in any representation at all. It's just gone. My vote only counts if I decide to vote strategically, as many people did in the last election, and to vote for a party that I think is going to win because it kind of represents my beliefs and I think that's how most of the people in my constituency are going to vote.

[*Translation*]

The Chair: Your time is almost up, Mr. Boulerice.

We will now continue with Mr. Deltell.

● (1030)

Mr. Gérard Deltell (Louis-Saint-Laurent, CPC): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

Ladies and gentlemen, welcome to the House of Commons.

I would also like to take this opportunity to greet the student group with us today. Welcome. You are seeing democracy in action, and that's what is more interesting.

I also offer my greetings to the people who are with us and who, am I to understand, are no longer in school.

Mr. Chair, I want to take a moment to wish a happy anniversary to everyone, although I'm one day late. A year ago, some of us were re-elected, while others were elected federally for the first time, as is my case.

Our committee has illustrated the very principle of democracy these past few months. We have held over forty meetings. We have travelled from coast to coast. We have met with thousands of Canadians. Every MP, in his or her way, has also held consultations. In fact, many have held meetings with constituents.

As for the Conservatives, many of our members have sent a backgrounder to the public, together with a reply coupon, and 81,000 people gave their opinion. The choice is clear: 91% of people who wrote to us demanded a referendum.

Having said that, each party adopted its own approach, be it the NDP, the Green Party, the Bloc Québécois or the Liberal Party.

In short, for several months, parliamentarians have been wondering about the future of the electoral system. As you know, from our side, we would like a referendum, if by chance there is electoral change. We are open to the discussion, and we feel that, ultimately, it is up to the public to decide.

My question is for you, Mr. Bozinoff and Mr. Schatten, from Forum Research Inc.

[*English*]

You work hard to know where people stand on those issues, and you have been working on that for many years.

Our party and every party has talked a lot about all the facts. We have had plenty of meetings from coast to coast, and thousands of people were involved in our process. Have you seen a change in the minds of people in the last months or years about the electoral system?

Mr. William Schatten: We would have to compare. That's something of interest. We would have to look at doing a time series analysis of some of our polls. That's not something that we had done in preparation for this; however, as you have pointed out, awareness of your committee has grown over the past few months. There has been a positive impact in terms of Canadians being aware that there is a dialogue taking place, but as our data alludes to, there's still significant work that would need to be done in terms of the knowledge of the issues and making sure that Canadians are informed about what the issues are regarding electoral reform.

Mr. Gérard Deltell: Have you seen any change in the population's mood?

Mr. William Schatten: That's something we could check and then get back to you on. As I said, we've done several surveys on this and we're going to continue polling this issue. We poll federally every single month, so in the next release we'll add some time series analysis. We'll do some trending charts on questions that have overlapped in all of our polls.

Mr. Gérard Deltell: If we're looking at the last years, have you seen any movement of people saying that we need new things or a new electoral system, or has it been exactly the same thing for many years? Are there a lot of people who would like to make some changes? Are there a lot of people who don't want to make any changes? Have you seen any movement on that in the last years?

Mr. Lorne Bozinoff: Anecdotally, qualitatively, we saw a populist mayor in the Toronto mayoral election five or six years ago, so I think there is an interest in the 1% versus the 99%, populism, accountability, the average guy getting his say, and so forth.

We're seeing that now in the U.S. It's the same kind of populist thing. I think there is an interest in accountability and everyone having their fair influence in society.

Mr. Gérard Deltell: Okay.

As you know, yesterday our Prime Minister, the one who calls the shots for this committee, made a statement. I will quote it in French because he said it in a French newspaper and I don't want to interpret what he has said. I'm sure that these people here are very professional and I hear they do a good job, as they have always done. What the Prime Minister said in *Le Devoir*, which is one of the most prestigious newspapers in Canada, is:

[*Translation*]

> Under Mr. [Stephen] Harper, there were so many people unhappy with the government and its approach that people were saying, “It takes electoral reform to avoid having a government we don't like.” But under the current system, they now have a government they are more satisfied with. And the motivation to want to change the electoral system isn't as strong….

● (1035)

[*English*]

Is it true?

Mr. William Schatten: We don't have exclusive data. I can't recall if we polled specifically on desire for electoral reform leading up to the federal election. That's something we can go back to. We definitely polled extensively prior to the last federal election.

Lorne, do you recall if that was a question we ever asked, on any of those leading-up polls?

Mr. Lorne Bozinoff: No.

I think it's fair to say, though, that compared to a year ago—how to say this—the poll rating of the current Prime Minister is much higher than that of the previous prime minister by far. There is some feeling that people are happier with their government, and it's reflected in the approval ratings we're seeing for the current Prime Minister versus the previous prime minister. There's no comparison. The approval rating is much higher with the current Prime Minister.

Mr. Gérard Deltell: It's quite interesting to look at. You are professionals on these issues. You can identify year after year if people are moving towards a new electoral system.

What we saw yesterday is not good for democracy, because he is the one calling the shots. At the end of the day he is the one who will decide, because he controls the executive and he controls the House of Commons, the legislature. I can tell you that if at the end of the day he decides to call a referendum on the current system and the other options, I'll say, "All right!" I'm not quite sure he's there. It's very disappointing for those who thought that we were in the process of having a real reflection of that, based on principle and not based on a political agenda. That's exactly what he has done.

The Chair: Thank you.

We'll go now to Mr. DeCourcey.

Mr. Matt DeCourcey: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair, and thank you to all our presenters for the enlightening testimony today.

I also want to thank Professor Paul Thomas for bringing his class here. Paul and I both had the pleasure a decade ago of working with Andy Scott, the former member of Parliament for Fredericton. I know the experience Paul had, as well as my own, was foundational in leading us on the paths we're each on today.

To your students I say, soak in what your professor has to offer because it certainly comes from a lot of in-depth knowledge of the political system and our political culture.

Speaking of political culture, Professor Cross, your testimony has reminded me of the fantastic testimony we received from Maryantonett Flumian, someone with a long and distinguished career in the public service, who spoke about an electoral system as one part of a larger ecosystem that includes a constitution that has shaped the country; a charter that defends our rights and freedoms; a Supreme Court; a Senate; the public; the provinces, provincial governments, and the responsibility bestowed upon them; the public service; our international relations; and the media. These are all factors within the ecosystem that helps shape the political culture that leads us to this conversation today. We need to consider these factors in deciding where we go from here.

When we ask Canadians in a poll if they think we should change the electoral system, do you think that they're thinking about the magnitude of issues, actors, and pieces that will inevitably influence or be influenced by a change?

Prof. William Cross: At this stage, the obvious answer is no. Most Canadians haven't thought through the issue. I'm not sure that my answer would be the same if we engaged in a year-long consultation, information, and education process with Canadians.

In terms of that, I think the New Zealand example, where there were two referendums a year apart, is very important. The first one didn't determine the issue but it raised consciousness, and people then said, "Oh, this is something I need to pay attention to." It was a good education process. I think that by the second referendum New Zealanders did understand what they were voting on. That's evidenced by the fact that two decades later, when they had another referendum, a solid majority reaffirmed their earlier decision after having lived with MMP for a couple of decades.

● (1040)

Mr. Matt DeCourcey: To me, that speaks to the importance of a process of validation, of education, and of bringing people along with the change and allowing them to find some level of comfort as things progress. That, to me, is good testimony to hear as a committee.

Could you speak to the notion of possible incremental change and how we may best be able to come to some form of consensus to deliver to Parliament and to government a change that could be palatable for Canadians in a digestible way, which they could then understand and/or become part of a process of understanding.

Prof. William Cross: Again, I would point to the New Zealand experience. It had two referendums, so that the first time, New Zealanders were not making the definitive choice. I contrast that with the Ontario or P.E.I. experiences, or even the experience in British Columbia.

Voters showing up in Ontario to a provincial election thinking they were just going to be voting for their MPP suddenly were also asked this other question that there hadn't been a lot of discussion about. They hadn't been informed much about it, so it was not surprising then to get a "no to change" answer.

I think a process that has more time...and I understand that this may not be the case here. You may be working under constraints. I think that makes it more difficult if you expect to have a change in place for the next election. That brings me back to my testimony that this doesn't leave time for parties to adjust either or to change their infrastructures.

Mr. Matt DeCourcey: Right. I forgot that is another part of the ecosystem. Given the list of checks and balances, and actors in the political sphere, is it fair to say that the simplistic argument that a majority government has 100% of the power is categorically false?

Prof. William Cross: I think so. I think that is false. I'm sure every Prime Minister wishes that he or she had 100% of the power but can point to a lot of examples where that's not the case. I think you see that in the way your caucuses and your committees work. This is where I get a bit uncomfortable with the notion of wasted votes. They might not count as much as they should, and there might be questions of equity in our system, but I've voted for lots of people who didn't end up as MPs and I never felt my vote was wasted, because I expressed my sentiment and that was counted.

The government acts differently if it has 52% of the popular vote, I suspect, than if it has 39%.

Mr. Matt DeCourcey: Democratic modernization and reform is still an important issue that we should be working at.

Prof. William Cross: Absolutely.

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

I have just one question for Messrs. Bozinoff and Schatten. We've heard a lot of public opinion polling results, but I haven't heard any public opinion poll on the issue of whether Canadians like minority governments or whether they're ready for coalition governments. I think that is important. It's a very central question to our deliberations here because some systems will give rise to that. Maybe Canadians are very comfortable with both ideas, but we have no public opinion polling that I've seen or can remember that speaks to how Canadians feel about that. How would you respond?

Mr. Lorne Bozinoff: I don't think we've asked about that, but we could easily rectify that.

Mr. William Schatten: In our current system, we know from previous examples where there's been talk of developing coalition governments that it hasn't been received favourably. They have been fairly unpopular. At the federal level, most recently, when Mr. Dion was trying to put together a coalition government there was a lot of public backlash to that, so maybe in the current system it is not viewed as favourably. It would be tough to try to assess how that would work in a different type of system.

The Chair: I just suggest that it would be good to know for our committee because it's a central question.

Thank you to all the witnesses. We're at meeting number 43 and we thought we'd heard it all, but it's not the case. We're getting original insightful testimony every day, and today was no exception.

[*Translation*]

Thank you very much.

I will remind committee members that our next meeting is this evening.

The meeting is adjourned.