



Green Leader Elizabeth May and #ERRE colleagues, including the NDP's Nathan Cullen and Alexandre Boulerice (2nd row right), at a meeting with First Nations elders and chiefs in Tsartlip, B.C., during the committee road show in late September. Photo for Policy

Keeping a Campaign Promise to Seek Major Democratic Reform

Elizabeth May

The Special Committee on Electoral Reform spent weeks hearing from constitutional and political experts, Canadian voters—disgruntled, idealistic and both—in an effort to formulate a response to the Trudeau government's mission of reaching a consensus on electoral reform. As Green Party Leader Elizabeth May writes, that process has been enlightening, pan-partisan and not at all Quixotic.

The Canadian quest for a fairer voting system is one that did not start recently. As a member of the Special Parliamentary Committee on Electoral Reform, I knew that we were not starting from scratch in seeking a fairer voting system; that we could build on a substantial body of work including the 2004 Law Commission report, the New Brunswick electoral reform commission, citizens' assemblies

in British Columbia and in Ontario, efforts in Prince Edward Island and extensive work in Quebec. I knew that, decades ago, Manitoba and British Columbia had, at different times, used multi-member constituencies. But it wasn't until I was named to the committee and really began digging that I discovered that the first time parliamentarians had been convened in a special committee to consider reforming our voting system was 1921.

The conclusion that our first-past-the-post (FPTP) voting system leads to distortions between the will of the people and the seats in the House is not a novel one. In fact, every time a Canadian review of FPTP has come to a conclusion the conclusion has been that we should get rid of it. Every time.

Politicians of all stripes as well as political scientists have long noted its deep flaws. At one time or another in their careers, former Prime Ministers Jean Chrétien and Stephen Harper had both lamented the perversity of results under FPTP. The reason that the first parliamentary committee met in 1921 was that these deficiencies were well known even then. In fact, 1921 was a big year for proportional representation. As the parliament at Westminster voted to give Ireland its own parliament, it took steps to protect the people of Ireland from the vagaries of FPTP. More specifically, Westminster took steps to protect minority rights of the Protestant population. While Westminster kept FPTP for themselves, Ireland was given a new proportional system, Single Transferable Vote (STV). Ireland has been electing its members of parliament with the STV system ever since.

In 1921, the Canadian Parliament took note of the new Irish system and wondered if it would work in Canada. The committee's work was not completed due to an election but the issue came up again in 1937 with another round of discussions. This was in a time when many women in Canada still did not have the vote, nor did indigenous people,

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nor Japanese Canadians and other ethnic minorities. Reform of our democratic institutions has been a work in progress. And while over the decades the right to vote was finally extended to all Canadian citizens, the right to have that vote count has been stymied.

The notion that every vote should count is fundamental in a democracy, and while all votes are certainly counted, that is not the same thing as having a vote that has any impact on the outcome. Many of our citizen witnesses in the open mic portions of our hearings lament that after decades of voting, they have not once voted for someone who was elected. Describing himself as a “perennial political loser” in Winnipeg, one witness pleaded for proportional representation to ensure his vote would finally count.

In the course of our hearings, it has become increasingly clear to the MPs on the committee that the choice and preference toward different voting systems aligns with questions of values. The experts in political science who have testified to the committee are very familiar with the trade-offs and value-attachments of different systems. As one of the world's most respected experts, Pippa Norris of Harvard, told us: “Party systems are fragmented and first-past-the-post majoritarian systems try to squeeze what the voters actually want to do in terms of their party preferences into a system that doesn't allow that sort of representation. That's really a very strong argument to say that some sort of reform in Canada is very appropriate.”

Bernard Colas, lawyer and one-time Law Commission analyst, testified

in similar terms. He proposed that fairness is a fundamental value for Canadians, and a powerful unifier. When you ask Canadians if it's fair that 39 per cent of the votes can win a party the majority of seats, overwhelmingly they will say it is not. Hence the recommendation of the 2004 Law Commission that it is in the interests of Canadian voters that we move to proportional representation in our voting.

Of course, if you ask a political party if it's fair they just won a majority with a minority of the votes in the election, they'll find it absolutely fair.

That is until this new government. After debating changing our voting system since 1921, for the first time a political party has formed a majority government due to the distortions that occur due to FPTP voting and still been willing to say it is not fair.

Justin Trudeau's election pledge to make 2015 the last election held under FPTP is historic. With only 39 per cent of the popular vote, some may argue Trudeau has no mandate to keep his election promise. After all, many lamented that having never gained the popular support of a majority of Canadians, Stephen Harper had no mandate to destroy climate action, gut environmental laws or enter into the FIPA with China. However, the Liberal mandate for electoral reform rests on very different footing. Not only did Trudeau as Liberal leader campaign on this promise (something Harper never did relating to reneging on climate action or selling us out to China), so too did the New Democratic and Green Party candidates. The popular vote for parties supporting the call that 2015 should

be the last election held under FPTP was 63 per cent. That's a mandate.

It is also a moral obligation. The increased voter turnout to 68 per cent in 2015, in my view, had a lot to do with mobilized youth and First Nations voting. As prime minister, Trudeau must not let down the newly engaged. Those who believed his promise did so in a constant battle against cynicism. Their faith in the system and in the promise of electoral reform must be met with a fair voting system for Canadians for 2019. Otherwise, not just the Liberals, but our society will face the heartbreak of increasing youth cynicism and disengagement.

Our committee is breaking records for public hearings cross-country by a parliamentary committee. I write this from the torture-test travel schedule of a new city

every day for three weeks: Regina, Winnipeg-St-Pierre-Jolys, Toronto, Quebec City, Joliette, Whitehorse, Victoria, Vancouver, Leduc, Yellowknife, Montreal, Halifax, St. John's, Charlottetown and Fredericton. We went to Iqaluit after Thanksgiving. In addition to normal committee format in which we hear from invited witnesses, we have also been holding open mic sessions for anyone who shows up, usually until 9:30 pm. And then up in the wee hours to get to the next city. This is a serious effort ignored by the media. But the public is turning out (while frequently complaining that there is not enough public awareness of our process).

On a personal level, it has been nothing but a joy to work so hard, going through such a gruelling travel schedule, while getting to know the eleven other members of the committee from the larger four parliamentary

parties. On the road, we are not sparing for partisan points: We hang out together, look out for each other and are all becoming good friends. I know that we hope to reach a decision by consensus. It is frequently flagged by academics appearing before us that the greater the consensus of the parties, the greater legitimacy our process will have in the public mind. At the moment, I am optimistic.

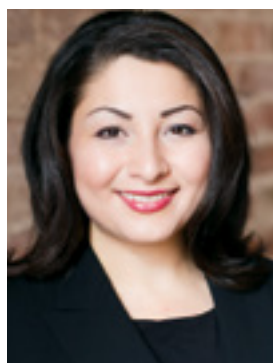
As 12 MPs, we owe it to the people of Canada to set aside partisanship and recommend the electoral reforms that best serve voters, that best meet standards of fairness, and that will increase voter engagement and empowerment. This is a once-in-a-generation opportunity. **P**

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#ERRE

A Conference on Electoral Reform
Une Conférence sur la Réforme électorale

OTTAWA, NOVEMBER 2 – 3, 2016



Everything you need to know about democratic reform

Democratic Institutions Minister Maryam Monsef will be the opening keynote speaker at #ERRE, a conference on electoral reform in Ottawa, November 2-3, presented by Policy and iPolitics, hosted by University of Ottawa's Public Law Group, and broadcast by CPAC.

Speakers include Huguette Labelle, Chair of the Advisory Board on appointments to the Senate, former Chief Electoral Officer Jean-Pierre Kingsley, Tom Axworthy, former principal secretary to Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau and former NDP Leader Ed Broadbent. Several MPs from the Special Committee on Electoral Reform are also participating.

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