

From: Graham White

Sent: Wednesday, February 9, 2022 6:46 PM

Subject: Electoral Reform

Members of the Special Committee:

Graham White, retired University of Toronto professor, here. I've watched several of your meetings with presentations from expert witnesses (almost all of whom I know). Although I don't consider myself especially "expert" on electoral reform, I do have some familiarity with the issues, for example, having served for three years as a member of the Ontario Democratic Renewal Secretariat's Academic Advisory Group. As well, I believe I am the only academic you will have heard from who has written on elections and legislative institutions in the territories (a few such publications are listed at the end of this submission).

In over three decades of studying and writing about the North, I have always made it a practice not to tell Northerners what to do; a guy from Toronto has no business telling Northerners how to run their governments. However, since you have invited comments from southern academics, please permit me some observations.

In my view, citizens assemblies are very useful in approaching issues such as electoral reform. However, it is important to bear in mind the inherent bias that citizens' assemblies (CAs) entail. I don't mean that those who take part come in biased; very few people know much about or care about electoral systems and those who do can readily be screened out. Rather, CAs are naturally inclined to recommend change. How could it be other, being composed of busy people who devote substantial time and effort to learning about electoral systems and to discussing possible courses of action? It is only to be expected that many – not all, but many – will, consciously or unconsciously, see that investment of time and effort as wasted should the end result be the status quo: 'why did I bother if nothing is going to happen?'

I did not watch all the presentations but I suggest that those I did watch, save that of my friend and colleague Peter Loewen, gave insufficient attention to the unique demography and geography of Yukon. Other than some forms of STV, most alternatives to first-past-the-post, and certainly full PR or MMP, would require either a significant increase in the number of MLAs or very substantial consolidation of existing riding boundaries, making for much larger constituencies. You know the views of Yukoners far better than I, but I suspect that neither alternative would find much political support.

I agree with those who have argued to you that if any significant change is to be made, consent of the people through a referendum is essential. However, as you have also been told by others, a serious, well-funded public education campaign is also essential. This should be a clear, neutral setting out of the various options up for consideration. My experience during the 2007 Ontario referendum on electoral reform suggests that such neutrality is achievable. In the run-up to the vote, I spoke to a number of seniors' and community groups about FPTP and MMP. At the end of an hour or longer session, I would often be asked which I preferred, which I took as a strong indication that my presentation had been quite objective.

However, ‘neutral’ or ‘objective’ does not mean vacuous. In 2007, Elections Ontario, which runs the province’s elections and referenda, was abysmally inadequate. It sponsored TV ads telling voters that they had an important choice to make but offered no useful information or explanation as to what that choice entailed.

Further, publication education should include a decent amount of public funding, with an option for private funding, for the two sides of the question (I very much agree that one clear choice, rather than a set of options is the way to go).

A related, crucial point: while referenda can be costly (mail-in or electronic voting can cut costs substantially, though both have downsides), if you’re truly interested in determining the views of the public, do not hold the referendum at the same time as an election (as occurred in PEI, Ontario and two of the three BC referenda). In Ontario, the case I know best, discussion of and attention to the election all but completely overwhelmed the referendum. The parties and party leaders said almost nothing about it and the media pretty much ignored it as well; the ‘yes’ and ‘no’ campaigns were poorly organized and funded. Together with Elections Ontario being almost totally MIA, the result was that most Ontarians had little if any understanding of the pros and cons of FPTP or MMP.

Finally, I don’t believe that any of the presentations covered important ‘list’ options in PR/MMP, though perhaps some did. In any event, if you’re not already, you should be aware that there are two, quite different methods of determining lists. In most instances, lists are “closed” in the sense that the parties not only determine who is on the lists for “top-up” members, but they also determine where candidates rank on the list. Advocates of PR/MMP argue that this enables better representation of otherwise underrepresented groups, such as women, Indigenous people, minority ethnic groups and the like. Critics point out that closed lists permit parties to place otherwise unelectable candidates high on the list, giving them a strong chance of winning a seat. It doesn’t have to be that way. Under an “open” list system, parties compile the lists (possibly though through in-party elections) but the voters get to indicate which candidates on the party list they prefer.

In closing, although the comments above represent my views as a political scientist, you deserve to know my views as a citizen. Overall, while I am aware of its shortcomings, I believe that MMP would be preferable to FPTP in Canada nationally and provincially. Given its uniqueness, however, I am not at all sure I would favour it for Yukon.

I hope you find these ramblings of some value. Best wishes for your deliberations. I look forward to your report.

Graham

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PS Quite unrelated to questions of electoral reform, I must tell you that since her first election, I have followed the career of your Chair with interest. This has no political basis: my elder daughter is Kathleen White, who usually goes by “Katie” but I exercise father’s prerogative and call her “Kate” ...

Selected publications:

“Westminster in the Arctic: The Adaptation of British Parliamentaryism in the Legislative Assembly of the Northwest Territories,” *Canadian Journal of Political Science*, XXIV (September, 1991), 499-523.

“And Now for Something Completely Northern: Institutions of Governance in the Territorial North,” *Journal of Canadian Studies*, 35 (Winter 2000-01), 80-99.

“Traditional Aboriginal Values in a Westminster Parliament: The Legislative Assembly of Nunavut,” *Journal of Legislative Studies* 12 (March, 2006), 8 -31.

“In the Presence of Northern Aboriginal Women? Women in Territorial Politics,” in Linda Trimble, Jane Arscott and Manon Tremblay, eds., *Stalled: The Representation of Women in Canadian Governments* (Vancouver: UBCPress, 2013), 233-52.

“The Territories,” in Jared J. Wesley. ed., *Big Worlds: Politics and Elections in the Canadian Provinces and Territories* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2016), 184-205.