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SPECIAL COMMITTEE ON ELECTORAL REFORM

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Thursday, July 14, 2022 — 6:00 p.m.

Chair: Kate White

SPECIAL COMMITTEE ON ELECTORAL REFORM

Members:

Kate White, Chair
Brad Cathers, Vice-Chair
Hon. John Streicker

Clerk:

Allison Lloyd, Clerk of Committees

Speakers:

Lloyd Freese
Dave Weir
Sally Wright

EVIDENCE**Haines Junction, Yukon****Thursday, July 14, 2022 — 6:00 p.m.**

Chair (Ms. White): I will now call to order this hearing of the Yukon Legislative Assembly Special Committee on Electoral Reform. I would like to begin by respectfully acknowledging that we are meeting on the traditional territories of the Champagne and Aishihik First Nations. This public hearing is scheduled for 6:00 p.m. to 8:00 p.m. tonight, and additional public hearings are being held in other Yukon communities. The Committee will be holding hearings later this month in Teslin and Watson Lake and hearings in Carmacks, Mayo, Dawson City, and Whitehorse in September. The Committee would like to remind Yukoners that they may also provide their input by e-mail or letter mail or by using the comment form on howyukonvotes.ca.

Allow me to introduce the members of the Committee. My name is Kate White, Chair of the Committee and Member of the Legislative Assembly for Takhini-Kopper King. Brad Cathers is Vice-Chair of the Committee and Member for Lake Laberge, and finally, the Hon. John Streicker, Member for Mount Lorne-Southern Lakes, is joining us by video conference as he is unable to travel due to COVID-19.

This Committee was established by the Yukon Legislative Assembly on May 26, 2021. The Committee's purpose is to examine electoral reform and report to the Assembly its findings and recommendations. In our study of potential changes to the voting system, the Committee first sought to identify what options may be available. The Committee hired Dr. Keith Archer to prepare a report on electoral systems. Dr. Archer's full 76-page report and an executive summary are available on the Committee's webpage at yukonassembly.ca/SCER.

The information from Dr. Archer's report has been summarized on the website howyukonvotes.ca, and summaries of some of the potential voting systems are included in a brochure that was sent to all Yukoners. Copies of the pamphlet are also available here tonight.

To deepen its understanding of the topic, the Committee heard from subject matter experts, including Dr. Archer, and academics from across Canada and the world through 14 video-conference hearings held between January and April of this year. Transcripts and recordings of the hearings are available on the Committee's webpage. It is important for the Committee to know what Yukoners think about electoral reform. From February 15 to April 10, 2022, the Yukon Bureau of Statistics administered a public survey for the Committee. The Committee would like to thank the 6,129 Yukoners — or 17.1 percent of Yukoners 16 and older — who completed that survey.

A report on the results of the survey is available on the Committee's webpage. We have not yet decided on our recommendations to the Legislative Assembly. The Committee is collecting opinions and ideas from Yukoners on electoral reform. The time allotted for this hearing will be devoted to

hearing from Yukoners, and we will not be answering questions or presenting information on electoral reform today.

If you would like to present your opinion to the Committee, please ensure that you have registered at the registration table, and please note that this hearing is being recorded and transcribed. Everything you say will be on the public record and posted on the Committee's website.

If you are participating by Zoom, you can send a chat message to the Clerk to be added to the list of presenters. If you need technical help with Zoom, please call 867-334-2448. Individual presentations to the Committee will be limited to five minutes, and if there is time remaining at the end of the presentations, presenters may be invited to speak for longer.

I would like to welcome everyone in the audience and ask that you please respect the rules of this hearing. Visitors are not allowed to interrupt or interfere in the proceedings. Please mute any electronic devices and refrain from making noise, including comments, during the presentations.

So, for anyone online, if you would like to present today, please indicate that in the chat to the Clerk of the Committee, and at this point in time, we will take a short pause.

Recess

Chair: Thank you. Mr. Freese, you have joined us on Zoom. Currently, you are the one attendee to the Haines Junction meeting. I wanted to know if you would like to present today. There is the ability for you to respond in the chat box. The Clerk of the Committee has sent you a note, or you could even unmute your microphone, if it's easier just for you to talk back.

Mr. Freese: I did that, I believe.

Chair: Hello, Mr. Freese. Would you like to present today?

Mr. Freese: Well, I don't have too much to present. The one — I haven't really followed this too closely, although I probably should. The method that I would think would be possibly a way of getting a more majority-type vote would be to have voters, when they go to the polls, select their candidates — one, two, three, four, if there are four parties that are running — so that they would — you know, their first preference, second preference, third preference, and fourth preference.

Chair: So, Mr. Freese, a ranked ballot? So, by picking your first, second, third, and fourth choice?

Mr. Freese: That's correct.

Chair: Is there anything else you would like to see in either the ballot or how the system is run?

Mr. Freese: No, I don't think so. I sort of think that I like that idea.

Chair: Excellent. We're grateful to have you online today. You're joined on Zoom by Mr. John Streicker, who is joining us from Mount Lorne-Southern Lakes, and Brad Cathers, who is the Vice-Chair. I'm just going to look to either of them to see if they have any questions.

John, do you have a question?

Hon. Mr. Streicker: Mr. Freese, one of the other questions we've been asking people beyond what system they

would like is also the process that we would take to possibly get there. For example, if there were a recommendation for a new system, would we go to referendum? There has also been a conversation about having something like a citizens' assembly. Do you have any thoughts about, if we were to consider a different system, the process we would take to try to get there?

Mr. Freese: A referendum would maybe work, yes, and there would maybe have to be a couple of options in there — yes, no, maybe with alterations — but I could see that.

Chair: Mr. Streicker, do you have a follow-up?

Hon. Mr. Streicker: No, that's great. Thank you, Mr. Freese.

Mr. Freese: You're welcome.

Chair: Mr. Cathers?

Mr. Cathers: I don't really have a question, but I would just like to thank you for logging on and sharing your views with us, Mr. Freese.

Mr. Freese: Well, unfortunately, it's one of those days in Haines Junction where you have a big turnout.

Chair: The best thing right now, Mr. Freese, is that you have 100 percent of our attention. Do you know how Zoom works? If you go into the bottom — sorry, as I'm trying to walk you through something I'm terrible at — if you would like to say anything else, just unmute yourself, but what we'll do is — I'm just going to get muted and we're going to wait to see if anyone else comes, unless you have anything else you would like to add right now.

Mr. Freese: Welcome to Haines Junction.

Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Freese: Hope you feel better, John. I don't have anything else to add.

Chair: Thank you so much for joining us, and thank you for the welcome; we appreciate it. If you have anything else you would like to add either tonight, if you choose to stay on — just like I said, unmute yourself, or you could always submit something in writing to our website, as well, but thank you for joining us.

Mr. Freese: Okay, and thanks for coming out.

Chair: Thank you; delighted.

Hon. Mr. Streicker: Madam Chair, I'm just going to turn my video off and just stay listening. If others join, I'll be nearby.

Chair: Thank you, Mr. Streicker. I believe right now, with that, let's take a 20-minute break, and if anything happens between now and 6:40, I will let you know, but let's take a 20-minute break right now. Thank you again for joining us, Mr. Freese.

Recess

Chair: I guess that was our first 20-minute break. Mr. Freese and Mr. Streicker, I will be on mute unless I see someone else join us on the Zoom call or someone joins us in person. If neither of those things happen, Mr. Freese, thank you again for joining us today, and we will patiently wait in optimism that someone else will join us.

I will just sign off for now — I will just go on mute — and come back, as required.

We will go on pause right now until either someone joins us in the room or Lloyd, if you have more to add — again, thank you for joining us today.

Mr. Freese: I did think of something else.

Chair: Oh, please, Mr. Freese, go ahead.

Mr. Freese: I was thinking of the ridings that we currently have, and I sort of like that idea, in that little places like Haines Junction and Old Crow, although they don't have the populations of the big cities like Whitehorse, I think it would be good to stick with that, rather than to have it totally by the numbers of different ridings.

I think if it was based on that, I'm sure that the election would be over by the time it left Whitehorse, much like the national system where the election is pretty well decided before it gets to the Manitoba border.

Chair: Mr. Freese, currently there are 19 ridings, so we, as a Committee, have definitely discussed the importance of rural representation. So, just to let you know that we are in agreement with that. Do you have any thoughts about expanding, either adding additional seats or removing seats from the 19 we currently have?

Mr. Freese: Sorry, you sort of broke up a bit there toward the end.

Chair: Have you put any thought behind whether or not we should add additional seats to the 19 or remove seats from the 19?

Mr. Freese: I haven't put any thought to it. Would those just make each riding a little smaller? Like, if you were to do it by population, if you were to say each riding has a thousand people — no, that would still not cover the Yukon; it may.

Chair: So, just on that, Mr. Freese, there was a part in Dr. Archer's report where he talked about the plus or minus the accepted percentage. In the Yukon, we already know that we exceed that, for example, in the Vuntut Gwitchin riding. We have seen incredible growth, for example, in places like Whistle Bend in Whitehorse. Of course, there's talk of expansion in Carmacks if the Casino mine goes forward. So partially, in asking about whether or not you see additional MLAs is my way of asking about whether or not it's important to you, for example, that people have more representation and whether it's the rural-urban split — I guess I'll leave it there.

Mr. Freese: I guess, if all of a sudden Carmacks doubled in size or Whistle Bend, for instance — I mean, Whistle Bend is huge already, but maybe they should have their own riding as well.

Chair: So, you're not opposed if, for example, a recommendation was to come out about looking at the number of MLAs?

Mr. Freese: I would think that you could only represent, say, so many people, so if — and I don't know the numbers, but say Carmacks was a thousand people already and if, all of a sudden, they grew to 2,000 or 3,000, maybe they should have another representative, and maybe — and I don't know how many residents it takes to make up a riding. How many people does each member have in their riding?

Chair: Yes, that's a great question. Right now, it varies widely, actually, between us all. Mr. Streicker, do you have any questions to Mr. Freese's last points?

Hon. Mr. Streicker: Sure. Hi again, Mr. Freese, and thank you. Mr. Freese, earlier you were talking about a ranked ballot system, and as well, you were talking about the importance of rural and urban representation. Sometimes, those things might have a trade-off — not necessarily, but I'm just trying to ask you about the weighing of those things, if the ranked ballot was a higher priority, in your sense, or the urban-rural splits, those types of things — just how you see the relative importance of those two issues.

Mr. Freese: I think all people want to be represented by somebody. If, in the case of a riding that has 6,000 and a riding that has 1,000, it may not make them feel sort of well-represented.

Chair: Mr. Cathers?

Mr. Cathers: Thank you for your thoughts. I don't really have a question but just thought you might be interested, based on some of your comments, knowing that, in the variance that Kate was talking about, the standard across the country is that there is typically a variance of 25-percent larger or 25-percent smaller in ridings compared to what the average population would be, but there is some variance in the Yukon, as there is in some of the provinces, to give rural regions a little more representation so they're not just overwhelmed by cities.

In the Yukon, what has typically happened when electoral boundary commissions are formed — which are composed of a representative picked by each territorial party, a judge who is on the Yukon Supreme Court, and a chief electoral officer — those commissions have typically come forward with recommendations that the seats in the Legislative Assembly in the Yukon be roughly divided half and half to provide more representation to rural Yukon so that the Assembly isn't just overwhelmed by Whitehorse.

It's a little bit off that exactly, but that's what the historical norms have been.

Mr. Freese: Okay, thank you. If it was sort of by population, then the Yukon nationally would be swallowed up by everything all the way down to Dawson Creek. Our representation would be very minimal.

Mr. Cathers: Indeed, that is true.

Chair: Excellent points to bring forward. Thank you, Mr. Freese. Anything else right now?

Mr. Freese: No, but maybe after the next break, I'll dream up something else.

Chair: Okay, I appreciate that. If no one else physically comes into the room or signs on, I will come back on just before we wrap up, and I'll give you another opportunity.

Mr. Freese: Okay, thank you.

Chair: I'm delighted to have you still with us, Mr. Freese.

Mr. Freese: Hopefully, you'll get a better turnout at other places.

Recess

Chair: So, Mr. Freese and Mr. Streicker, we are currently joined by Mr. Dave Weir in the room. Dave, you have five minutes to present, and the Committee members may have questions when you're done.

Mr. Weir: I'm bone tired and unprepared, and I don't have a whole lot to say, but I came tonight essentially because I think this is a very important topic. I think that we desperately need electoral reform. I don't have a specific opinion on which system I would like to see us move toward, but I think, when we see political parties conducting their own elections for their leaders — for example, right now, that's going on with the Conservative Party — using systems other than first-past-the-post, it's absolutely clear that they're doing that because they see that as the most democratic, so why would we, as a territory, be doing it in a less democratic way?

To me, the writing is on the wall. To me, the fact that electoral reform hasn't happened so far is clearly because there are vested interests in keeping the system the way it is; it benefits some players more than others, and on a federal level, it tends to benefit the Liberal Party.

I don't know if that's true on a territorial level or not; I haven't looked at those numbers, but certainly, on a federal level, it does. When I look around this room and I see all the empty chairs, a lot of what occurs to me is that I think people aren't here because they're cynical about the process, and they look at the fact that electoral reform hasn't happened so far because the people making the decisions are benefited by the current system, so why bother pushing?

That's kind of what I see. That's the sum of my thoughts.

Chair: Thank you, Mr. Weir. Mr. Streicker, have you any questions?

Hon. Mr. Streicker: Thanks, Mr. Weir. One of the things that we've been asking people, beyond what system there might be, is also what process we might take if we were to consider a different system — for example, a referendum or a citizens' assembly. I'm just wondering if you have any thoughts on that topic.

Mr. Weir: I think a referendum is a double-edged sword in that it's easy to make the statement that we will do what the people of the Yukon want, as expressed through a referendum. That would be an easy thing to say, and it would be easy to try to say that is the most democratic way to go about it, but the reality is that I don't know how educated the average person in Yukon is on the topic, and therefore, without some system to drastically increase the level of education on the topic first, I would doubt the quality of the referendum. I don't know if that makes sense, what I'm saying.

Chair: Mr. Streicker, any additional questions?

Hon. Mr. Streicker: Sure, but I'm happy as well, Madam Chair, if it goes around the room. Just in terms of — Mr. Weir, you've said it's really important that we educate the public first so that they're fairly informed. One of the ways that we saw, I believe it was New Zealand, do it was they had a referendum before and after — I think it was a staged referendum. Would that be useful in the sense that, by then, people would have a shot at the system and then they would have a better sense as they're voting?

Mr. Weir: I'm not sure — before and after an election? Before and after —?

Hon. Mr. Streicker: I think they used a referendum at first to agree to try a new system, but before they even got into that system, they agreed that some period of time later they would hold another referendum just to check in with folks on whether the system was working for them.

Mr. Weir: It sounds reasonable. I would need to learn more about it to have an opinion on that one.

Mr. Cathers: I don't really have any questions; I would just like to thank you for sharing your views. And just noting on the topic that John shared, just for the record, New Zealand actually had three referendums on the topic of electoral reform, and three times, the referendum result was in favour of moving forward to the system they have today — two before they moved to their mixed-member proportional model and then one that was held a number of years after to review whether people still wanted to keep that in place.

Mr. Weir: Do you know if they had any kind of system for educating people in addition to the referendum or — ?

Mr. Cathers: They did, and rather than relying on my memory for exactly what they had, you might find it interesting to go on the webpage for this Committee and the presentation from the one presenter from New Zealand which contained a bit of information about that. You might find that interesting to watch and just to hear her thoughts on what they did and the New Zealand experience.

Chair: Thank you, Mr. Cathers. Thank you, Mr. Weir. I actually don't have questions at this point, but I would encourage you to submit any further thoughts you might have to the Committee's webpage. I encourage folks who are passionate about the issue to also reach out, and I believe — any closing statement or closing thoughts?

Mr. Weir: No, I'm good.

Chair: Okay, with that, similarly, we will mute ourselves on this side of the room, and Mr. Freese, I'll be back just before the end and come back live if anyone else joins us.

Mr. Freese: Okay, thank you.

Recess

Chair: Thank you for joining us again. I see that Ms. Sally Wright has just joined us on the Zoom link. Sally, did you want to present this evening?

There you go; you are now unmuted.

Ms. Wright: I just came from the Fireweed Market. We had our table set up today. Lots of feedback today about the survey and how difficult it was today, and we're just continuing the Fair Vote Yukon, trying to get a citizens' assembly so people can learn. That's really our focus. People need more opportunities to learn about electoral reform.

Chair: Thank you, Sally. So, your recommendation today stands at a citizens' assembly?

Ms. Wright: Yes, and I would also recommend that there were better ads for the hearing. I don't know how many people made it to Haines Junction.

Chair: Noted. We did advertise in the newspaper, the radio, and on Facebook, but I take your point for next time.

Ms. Wright: Which newspaper? I didn't see anything in the Wednesday newspaper neither —

Chair: In the Friday papers?

Ms. Wright: Well, that's tomorrow.

Chair: Last week? The Friday papers go to the communities.

Ms. Wright: Yes, and so it was advertised then — postponed — the two postponed ones.

Chair: No, the postponed and today's meeting in Haines Junction.

Ms. Wright: Okay.

Chair: Thank you for being here, Sally, and we will — we already know that your recommendation is a citizens' assembly, but thank you for coming, and thank you for having the Fair Vote table set up at the market.

Ms. Wright: You're welcome. I'm just a volunteer; you guys are getting paid. Thank you.

Chair: All right, thank you. John, any questions from you? No questions? No questions from Brad.

Okay, thank you, Sally.

Recess

Mr. Freese: Have a safe drive home, you guys, and thanks for coming out.

Chair: Mr. Freese, thank you so much for being here for the duration. We really appreciate it, and have a lovely evening.

Mr. Freese: You too. Watch out for that loose gravel.

Chair: You know, sometimes it's not the numbers that count; it is the level of engagement and conversations, and we thank you for that.

Mr. Freese: Thanks again.

Mr. Cathers: Thank you.

Recess

Chair: Before I adjourn this hearing, I would like to say a few words on behalf of the Committee. First, I would like to thank everyone who presented their thoughts to the Committee. I would also like to thank the Yukoners who were listening to and watching this hearing. The Committee will be hearing from Yukoners at more community hearings over the next few months. Information on those public hearings, as well as transcripts and recordings, will be available on the Committee's webpage at yukonassembly.ca/SCER.

The public can learn more about potential voting systems at howyukonvotes.ca. This hearing is now adjourned.

The Committee adjourned at 7:54 p.m.