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SPECIAL COMMITTEE ON ELECTORAL REFORM

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Tuesday, September 13, 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

Speaker: Mark O'Donoghue

EVIDENCE**Mayo, Yukon****Tuesday, September 13, 2022 — 6:00 p.m.**

Chair (Ms. White): I will now call to order this hearing of the Yukon Legislative Assembly's Special Committee on Electoral Reform. I would like to begin by respectfully acknowledging that we are meeting on the territory of the First Nation of Na-Cho Nyäk Dun. This public hearing is scheduled for 6:00 to 8:00 p.m. The Committee has been holding hearings in communities across Yukon. Our final community hearing will be in Carmacks tomorrow evening.

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. The deadline for written submissions is September 30, 2022.

Allow me to introduce the members of the Committee. I am 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 the Member for Lake Laberge, and finally, the Hon. John Streicker is the Member for Mount Lorne-Southern Lakes.

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. Summaries of some of the potential voting systems are included on a brochure that was sent to all Yukoners. Copies of that pamphlet are 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 to 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 who completed that survey; that's 17.1 percent of Yukoners age 16 and older. 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. 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 may 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 for this hearing. Visitors are not allowed to disrupt or interfere in the proceedings. Please mute any electronic devices and refrain from making noise, including comments, during the presentations.

When you are called to speak, please come up to the microphone.

Mark.

Mr. O'Donoghue: Thanks very much for coming to Mayo. I'm Mark O'Donoghue. I'm not an expert on electoral reform or anything; I would just like to present some of my views. I'm an immigrant to Canada. I am a proud Canadian who has voted in every election since becoming a citizen in 1997 — every election that has been available to me. I'm not a member of any political party, and I have voted for candidates from a number of different parties.

I would just like to make several observations. First, I would say that, in most elections, especially federal elections, I found myself voting strategically for a candidate running for a party that I felt was more likely to form a government than a candidate whose views were closest to mine. I was mostly voting to prevent a party whose views I did not support from getting into party than voting for the candidate I supported. This is a direct result of the first-past-the-post voting system.

Second, I guess I find it frustrating and undemocratic that we have had successive majority governments at a federal level when they've only gotten 35 to 40 percent of the vote, yet they have 100 percent of the power, and I find that something frustrating and something that I don't think is very democratic.

Third, I think that the first-past-the-post system encourages partisan politics among parties over working together that's needed to run minority governments. I just find there's a huge amount of time, energy, and goodwill wasted on developing sound bites and mounting attacks on governments instead of looking for solutions. I think partisan politics is getting more and more aggressive, to the point where I think they are becoming a danger to democracy, and I will touch on that a little bit later.

So, when I hear — when I read about the different ways of voting, I definitely support reform to get rid of the first-past-the-post system. When I look at the options that have been discussed, my preference is for the ranked ballot system, in which voters list their preferences for candidates in order when they vote, rather than just choosing their top choice. I do prefer this over the proportional representation systems, in which votes are allocated according to the parties' proportions of the

votes. There are several reasons for this that I will just describe briefly.

For the ranked ballot system, I'll just briefly describe my understanding of that. It's if a candidate with the most votes has more than 50 percent, he or she is a winner; if no candidate has more than half the votes, then the lowest candidate is dropped and his or her votes are allocated among the other candidates, according to the second choices of the voters, and this process continues until one candidate has more than 50 percent.

Intrinsically, I think that's more democratic than the first-past-the-post system, in that you can vote for the candidate you prefer and yet explicitly identify who you'd like to win, if that candidate is not successful. Also, I find it more fair than the first-past-the-post system, in that the results would better reflect overall voter preferences in cases where votes are fairly evenly split among the candidates. For example, if votes were split 35, 33, 32 percent among left, right, centrist candidates based on first choices and most voters for the centrist candidate were by far right leaning, the first-past-the-post system would elect the left-leaning candidate in that situation, even though they only received 35 percent of the vote, whereas the ranked ballot system would elect the right-leaning candidate, which I think more accurately reflects the views of the voters.

I think the ranked ballot system would also tend to eliminate more extreme candidates, who are sometimes able to attract the most votes, but not the majority of the votes. Finally, I find that ranked ballots are easier to understand than some of the proportional representation systems, and also, candidates are directly elected, rather than selected by parties. A system like this, I think, would be more likely to be approved by voters, and we would not end up with representatives that we did not vote for.

I think proportional representation systems directly affect voter preferences by allocating seats among the parties; however, a lot of these systems are really complicated, especially the mixed member proportional system, and I think voters are much less likely to approve of a change to those kinds of systems when they don't understand them. Secondly, I really don't like the idea of getting representatives that we did not elect, who were selected by the parties.

In conclusion, I would like to say several things. First, I do support replacing our first-past-the-post voting system, and my preference would be for a system of ranked ballots. One criticism that we've heard of the ranked ballot system is that [inaudible] because the second choice of both right- and left-leaning voters will typically be the centrist candidate. Actually, I have two things to say about this. I think, first, the most voters in a given area tend toward more centrist views, and I think the candidate elected should reflect that and that the seat should not go to a candidate of either right or left who can scrape up a slim majority.

I'm not a member of any party, so I don't particularly care, really, which party is favoured by which system. I think it's more important to me that democracy is the priority here. Second, if most voters in a given area are either right- or left-leaning, the preferential voting system, or the ranked ballot

system, rather, would still tend to elect candidates who reflect those views.

Another criticism of alternative voting systems is that we may end up with more minority governments that are less stable and efficient. In my view, if the views of Canadians are very split, then I think we should end up with more minority governments. I think this will force parties to work together, rather than wasting so much time on partisan politics. I don't think efficiency that's unfair should be considered more desirable than what's fair and democratic.

Finally here, I think people who I have heard who are opposed to changing the way we vote say we shouldn't fix what's not broken and should keep our present system for that reason alone. I would argue that democracy in Canada and in the world in general is in great danger right now. We have seen a big increase in hyper-partisan politics to the point where politicians are getting death threats; they're getting shouted down for stating their views, and we're seeing extremes, like the FU Trudeau parades here in Whitehorse. I think it has gotten really nasty. We have media outlets springing up spouting extreme political views, and there's a wave of disinformation and conspiracy theories on social media and other Internet sites.

Where I came from in the US, families can't even talk to each other anymore, because that's how polarized politics have gotten. I don't think we can say that things aren't broken right now. I think we are in desperate need of anything that can increase people's confidence and participation in democracy, make the system more fair, and to lower the temperature of this hyper-partisanship that we're getting. I think electoral reform is one thing that can help us do that. Thank you.

Chair: Thank you, Mr. O'Donoghue. Please, don't go too far away. I'm sure there are going to be questions. Mr. Streicker? Mr. Cathers? Do either of you have questions?

Hon. Mr. Streicker: I'm happy to start. Thank you, Mark; thanks, in particular, for your statement: Democracy is the priority.

Just building on that, one of the questions that we have been trying to ask ourselves is not just where we might land as a territory, but how we might get there. What would process look like for you? If we were to change our system, do you believe that it should be the choice of the Legislature, the choice of Yukoners? How do you imagine that we get to that?

Mr. O'Donoghue: Yes, I know the criticisms of going with a referendum to get to this sort of thing, because the existing system has all the inertia — I guess, it's hard to change a system through a referendum. I think if the change is big enough that it is something that would have to be something that would be approved by people in general, I would support a referendum. There have been referenda in BC, in New Brunswick, Ontario — I think they have all had referenda, and it has been really hard to do public education on this, because these systems are so complicated. I think we need to learn from the experiences in those different provinces and present options to voters that are really simple, not present them with very complex systems, which is one of the reasons I support the ranked ballot system, because I just think it's much easier to understand than those other ones — and a really big education

campaign to go along with it and, again, try to keep the partisan politics out of that, because those campaigns have been unsuccessful in most jurisdictions where they have tried it.

Hon. Mr. Streicker: Thank you. I have other questions, but —

Chair: I'm going to jump in then — sorry, Mr. Cathers. So, Alaska is our nearest example of a ranked ballot, and I'm sure you, like many of us, were paying close attention. How do you feel the first go-around in Alaska went with the ranked ballot?

Mr. Donoghue: I didn't follow that closely. I knew some of the more high-profile candidates in that one made it. It seems to have worked; I know the system got criticisms, especially from one of the candidates there. I don't know how it was, as far as public acceptance and whether people felt comfortable with it.

Chair: One of the things that the Alaska media was reporting on was the importance of education ahead of time, and something that you referenced before was the importance of people understanding what the issues are if, for example, it goes to a referendum, so they understand what they're voting for. So, for you, education, no matter what the decision is, is going to be key, so people can follow along?

Mr. Donoghue: It will be, and it seems like people opposed to changing really took advantage of the complexity of the choices that voters were being given and took advantage of that, and that's something we shouldn't do for that reason alone. Yes, I think public education would be key.

Chair: Thank you. Mr. Cathers?

Mr. Cathers: Actually, I'll defer to John.

Hon. Mr. Streicker: Mark, you talked about the importance of the simplicity of the system. One of the things that we've had, other themes in our conversations, especially in communities, is local representation. You mentioned about that. Another one is the balance of the makeup of the Legislature for ridings that are within Whitehorse and ridings that are outside of Whitehorse — the communities. If we were to go with a ranked ballot system, then presumably we don't necessarily need to adjust that current set-up, but of course, it could, as well, and I'm just wondering if you have any thoughts about the importance of local representation, about the importance of the makeup of the Legislature vis-à-vis our communities.

Mr. O'Donoghue: I do think local representation is critical. Anyone who has lived in a community knows that the concerns and the issues are different from what they are in Whitehorse, and that's one of my main reasons that some of the proportional representation systems that I don't like, is that some of them do not include local representation. I think that is key. The balance of rural and Whitehorse seats in the Legislature — I think, right now, it's reasonable, and I think it is really important to keep these rural ridings, even though some of them don't have tons of people in them. I think it's really important to keep them so they can bring those views forward.

Hon. Mr. Streicker: Thank you.

Chair: So, I'm going to jump in here with a completely different question. We started hearing from some younger folk, and one of the things that they want brought forward is lowering the voting age. So, right now, it's a group of young people petitioning to lower the voting age to 16. Do you have any thoughts about the voting age? As it stands right now, it's —

Mr. O'Donoghue: Yes, I would support that. I think, especially right now — I'm a biologist. I see climate change as being a massive issue for the world as a whole, and I think the young people are expressing that the most clearly, because they're going to be living in the world we leave for them, and I would love to hear that view coming forward more strongly, and I think it would be good for increasing involvement in democracy, as they get to be older citizens.

Chair: Thank you. Any further questions?

All right.

Mr. Cathers: I would just say — I don't really have a question, Mark. I appreciate you explaining your thoughts around the ranked ballots and taking the time to come out here this evening and sharing your thoughts and responses to additional questions.

Mr. O'Donoghue: Thanks very much for listening.

Chair: Thank you, Mr. O'Donoghue. At this point, I'll ask the room if anyone would like to present.

All right, seeing none, at this point I will call a recess, and I'll call us back to order, as required.

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, and I would also like to thank the Yukoners who are listening and watching this hearing.

Information on the Committee's 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 7:53 p.m.