

If We Don't Know, We Can Learn

The Right to Know – The Opportunity to Know

We are responding to a shocking statement by the members of the group promoting a NO vote in the upcoming referendum on Electoral Reform. They have said “if you don't know, vote no”. It is a clear invitation to people to vote against Mixed Member Proportional (MMP) without knowing what they are voting against. Worse than that, the No group implies that Islanders may not be smart enough to understand MMP. Various forms of MMP have been in use for many decades in numbers of jurisdictions around the world. People elsewhere seem to know their chosen voting system.

Members of Cooper Institute, in our 35 years involved in community education programs, know from experience that PEI has a population of very bright and very wise people. There is no lack either of knowledge or the capacity to learn. Islanders are exceptionally well versed in politics. We are also quick to see political shenanigans for what they are.

We believe that when people are making choices, whether these are personal, family-related, economic or political, they have “the right to know”. They have the right to know what the choices are. They have the right to know the advantages and disadvantages of the choices. They have the right to discover and know- for themselves- the consequences of their choice. They have the right to learn in a respectful environment. They have the right not to have “believers” talk down to them. They have the right not to be coerced, persuaded, or worse, bullied.

An important aspect of the “right to know” is opportunity. Some people in PEI believe that if people don't show up for “information” sessions, that is a sign that they don't care. First of all, we know that knowledge and information are not the same. We all know lots of people who are brimming over with information and who are very adept at trivia games. Treating people to information does not help them to know what's behind a proposal, who pays, who profits, and the consequences for the lives of everyday people. People get the best knowledge when they are in an atmosphere which respects the knowledge they already have and which does the sharing of knowledge in which everyone is both teacher and learner. Experts displaying their advanced knowledge and experience have the negative effect of closing people down.

Another aspect of opportunity is impediment to access. In PEI, almost 40% of residents are living from cheque to cheque. Many seasonal workers, whose EI has run out, don't even have a cheque coming in. Getting educated on a given matter, no matter how important, is the last thing on their minds. This is not apathy. This is needing to focus on the necessities of life.

The majority of Islanders may not even know there is a referendum coming up with the next election, which could change the political landscape of PEI.

Cooper Institute, with many others in the community, also believes that we all have a civic duty to know as much as possible about the important issues which touch our lives. Choosing a system of electing representatives to the Legislature, though perhaps not our most earth-shaking decision, is important. We all have a responsibility to find out as much as we can about the two choices being offered in the up-coming referendum. If we say “Yes” to MMP we bring in a new system or we can say “no” to MMP and stay with the First Past the Post, the current system.

Whether we say yes or no, let's do it with the best knowledge we can acquire. We say that by the time of the referendum vote: if for some reason you don't know, then don't vote on the referendum question.

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