

**Presentation
to the
Prince Edward Island
Legislative Committee on Democratic Renewal**

**Cooper Institute
November 4, 2015-11-03
Charlottetown**



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Introduction

Cooper Institute is pleased to participate in the Public Hearings on Democratic Renewal. It is a topic of great importance to the people of Prince Edward Island that is receiving much attention in other parts of Canada as well as at the federal level.

Cooper Institute is a community-based, social justice collective. We work in communities across Prince Edward Island on social, economic and environmental issues that are vital to Island residents. We have daily involvement in, and with, other community-based organizations dedicated to work for social justice in all its forms. Whenever we can we work within and support the formation of coalitions.

Our starting point is always the knowledge and wisdom of everyday people. We facilitate and support groups in analyzing the causes and motivations behind any given injustice. This involves identifying the strength of the people. We encourage people to take appropriate action, which we hope will help contribute to the building up of social justice for them and their communities.

Cooper Institute is a member group of the PEI Coalition for Proportional Representation, which is made up of community groups and individuals who are working for the implementation of Proportional Representation in Prince Edward Island. The Coalition's aims are to:

- increase citizen knowledge and understanding of PR,
- identify community concerns about PR and allay those concerns,
- advocate for a thorough, transparent, measured process for the discussion of electoral reform, and
- ensure that citizens understand which options being proposed are proportional and which are not.

Understanding of Democracy

Our understanding of democracy is that it involves more than voting once every four years. Democracy is also about the participation of people in all sectors of our society in all stages of policy development and decision-making. In order for our participation to be meaningful, we need to see that our contribution – our voices, our wisdom – is taken seriously, and that our input makes a difference.

In a democratic system, every person's vote counts, or to put it another way, each vote has the same potential to influence the outcome of an election. That is not the case in the First Past the Post electoral system. Adversarial politics, strategic voting, distortion of election results and so-called false majorities, low representation of women, disproportionate power placed in the hands of the governing party – these *are* the results of First Past the Post and they are things that discourage citizens from engaging in politics and even from voting. In the federal election held a few weeks ago, the Liberals won every seat in Atlantic Canada, despite the fact that 40% of the region's voters actually voted for other parties. How, we wonder, have our preferences been reflected in the current government of Canada?

When it comes to transforming the system and enhancing democracy, we believe the process is as important as the final product. It must be open, transparent and inclusive. We strongly believe that the timeline for this process is far too short. It overlaps with other important hearings on the development of a Water Act. And to further complicate things, some of the hearings took place in the middle of a highly charged federal election. The tight timelines discourage participation and thoughtful consideration, which is opposite of what we want. It is too important a topic to be rushed.

While we understand that Islanders are generally not shy about politics, this discussion may leave people out if, for example, they feel decisions have already been made, or if they feel too rushed or lacking in opportunities to engage in conversations with their friends and neighbours about the topic.

Cooper Institute supports a change in the electoral system to one that is more inclusive and representative of the community, that is more collaborative across party lines and that encourages consensus based decision making. We want a government that more accurately reflects peoples' choices when it comes to policies and values as reflected in party platforms.

Proportional Representation

Most of the world has some form of proportional representation, evidence that there's something good about it.

In fact, in 2004, the Law Commission of Canada, based on extensive research and consultation, recommended that the federal electoral system be changed to a mixed member system that allows for more proportional representation of parties in the House of Commons. However, since neither the Liberals nor Conservatives were in favour of changing the system at the time, the recommendation was not followed up on.

Cooper Institute also favours a mixed member system - currently used in countries such as New Zealand and Germany. Such a system would allow Islanders to continue to directly elect local MLAs in their districts, and at the same time ensure that the number of seats each party wins in the Legislature reflects the percentage of the popular vote that they received.

Proportional Representation creates space for a fairer representation of rural and urban, encourages more participation of women, minorities, youth and First Nations people. Parties could be encouraged to make such representation a goal when they create their party lists.

There is documented evidence that Proportional Representation increases the participation of women in politics. In terms of gender parity within government, Canada ranks 39th in the world behind countries such as Afghanistan and Iraq. On October 19, only 26% of MPs elected to government were women. In PEI, the numbers are even worse: after our election earlier this year, women comprise only 18.5% of the Provincial Legislature. We need to take steps to improve this underrepresentation.

But gender equity is not the only positive outcome of Proportional Representation. It can also result in increased voter turnout, as people have more choice and are less likely to see their votes as "wasted". It reduces the possibility of false majorities, and promotes collaboration among parties.

Arend Lijphart, a world-renowned political scientist, has spent his career studying democratic features of various countries. In his landmark study, “Patterns of Democracy: Government Forms and Performance in 36 countries, he compares 36 countries over 55 years. He concluded that PR outperforms FPTP on measures of democracy, income equality, quality of life, environmental outcomes and economic growth”.

The White Paper and the Process

Cooper Institute has some grave concerns about the White Paper that was prepared as a background document for these Public Hearings, and about the public engagement process.

- 1) The White Paper favours a system of preferential ballot, which on its own will not result in proportional representation. In fact, this is stated in the White Paper, which says: *“The system does not directly translate vote share into seat share, and hence may not succeed in making election outcomes results more proportional”* and *“While the measures suggested here do go part-way toward proportionality, some voters may still be underrepresented or unrepresented in the Legislature, and smaller or newer parties may still experience greater challenges in winning seats.”*
- 2) The paper fails to provide evidence that the preferential ballot combined with dual electoral districts would have more potential than the current system of FPTP to affect gender balance, or to be more inclusive of minorities and First Nations.
- 3) The Legislative Committee on Democratic Reform is not representative of the Prince Edward Island political landscape. It does not include representatives from all PEI parties with official status.
- 4) The Committee does not represent the population of Prince Edward Island. It should not be composed entirely of elected MLA’s. Members of the community, representing the diversity of PEI that we are striving for in our Legislature, should be part of the deliberation and decision-making process. The White Paper includes a lengthy section on the Coalition for Women in Government. Why is there not a representative of that group involved in the committee? If the aim is to have a system that is more inclusive of Newcomers to Canada, First Nations and Youth, perhaps they should be involved in framing the questions, hearing and assessing the input from other Islanders, and developing a proposal for an improved system.
- 5) The process for public input needs to be more interactive and based on dialogue among members of the community. The current system is exclusive. People in the wider Island community don’t see themselves as experts, so will be discouraged from making presentations.

We wonder how people are being encouraged to get involved and come out to meetings. It is not enough to pick a community and announce that the committee will have hearings there. A community development model of presentation would allow people to talk to one another in small groups, to grapple with the ideas and possibilities of a new system of government. We must create a certain level of comfort with this issue. Maybe we could have some tea and cookies! A more complete process might include town hall meetings, with opportunities for people to engage with one another in “community conversations”. In discussing and debating ideas and proposals we deepen our understanding of the possibilities and are better placed to offer informed opinion, and to make a decision.

Recommendations

Cooper Institute recommends that the Government of Prince Edward Island, and the Legislative Committee on Democratic Reform undertake the following:

1. Create a Citizens' Assembly – to oversee the process, review the public input, formulate the question – a body that is inclusive, representative of the PEI population, and adequately supported by government.*
2. Organize another round of community consultations, using the model of town hall meetings to allow people to learn more about the possibilities before being asked to make a decision.
3. Provide background material and information on options such as Mixed Member Proportional Representation as options for Prince Edward Island.

In summary we applaud the government and the Premier for taking this bold step to explore options for democratic renewal. It is a crucial issue and should be allocated adequate time and resources for a fulsome and inclusive discussion.

* A good example of this would be the Citizens' Assembly formed in British Columbia before its referendum on electoral reform in 2005. The Assembly was comprised of (160) citizens randomly selected, representing each constituency in B.C. Members took part in a thorough orientation to electoral reform, involving presentations by experts, group discussions and access to a range of source materials. They then held over 50 public hearings and received many more written submissions. After considering everything they had learned and heard, the Assembly submitted a report and a recommendation on the question that should be put to the electorate. A similar system of Citizens' Assembly was used in Ontario leading up to its 2007 referendum on electoral reform.