

Report on Proceedings

**“Renewing Democracy:
Citizen Engagement in Voting System Reform”**

Law Commission of Canada

Government Conference Centre
2 Rideau Street, Ottawa, ON

April 25-26, 2002

Report Prepared by:
Robert Crocker

Table of Contents

- I. Introduction**
- II. Democratic Renewal and the Issue of Electoral Reform**
 - 1. Ongoing Problems with Winner-Take-All Voting**
 - 2. Media Coverage**
 - 3. Attention by Think Tanks**
 - 4. Positions by Civil Society Organizations**
 - 5. Federal Party Positions**
 - 6. Provincial Government Actions**
 - 7. Conclusion: Electoral Reform on the Agenda**
- III. Citizen Engagement: Electoral Reform Groups**
 - 1. Inclusiveness**
 - 2. Shared Principles**
 - 3. Access to Information**
 - 4. Public Dialogue**
 - 5. Made-in-Canada Solutions**
 - 6. High Profile Supporters**
 - 7. Working with Political Parties**
- IV. Citizen Engagement: Other Advocacy Groups**
 - 1. Working with Government**
 - 2. Effective Structure**
 - 3. Framing the Issue**
 - 4. Tools to Communicate**
 - 5. Mobilizing People**
 - 6. Mobilizing Funds**
- V. Lessons from Other Countries**
- VI. Framing the Issue**
 - 1. Individual Canadians and Broad Coalitions**
 - 2. Groups and Organizations**
 - 3. Marginalized People**
 - 4. Political Parties**
 - 5. Addressing Common Misperceptions**
- VII. Engaging Citizens**
 - How to Engage:**
 - 1. Plain language materials**
 - 2. The Internet**
 - 3. Public opinion surveys**
 - Who to Engage:**
 - 4. Media**
 - 5. Political parties**
 - 6. Civil society groups**
- VIII. Conclusion**
- IX. Appendix 'A': Agenda**
Appendix 'B': List of Participants

I. Introduction

The perceived legitimacy of government and public institutions in Canada has been on a downward trend over the last three decades. During this period, Canadians have become more cynical and less satisfied with their political system. Although the causes of this growing discontent are various and complex, it is clear that many citizens no longer defer to government and its institutions. It is within this context that many Canadians have started to discuss and debate the renewal of their democratic institutions, including the electoral system.

Guided by the notion that fundamental reforms to democratic institutions must be publicly inclusive, the Law Commission of Canada, in partnership with Fair Vote Canada, convened a diverse range of experienced and recognized leaders and experts from a wide variety of organizations and constituencies. The conference, *Renewing Democracy: Citizen Engagement in Voting System Reform* (April 25-26, 2002), was designed to examine methods for engaging Canadians on issues associated with the current electoral system and its reform.

This report summarizes the ideas and discussions that were raised at that conference. The first part of the conference examined the current status of citizen engagement in electoral reform. While citizen initiatives are now underway in many provinces and at the national level, it is clear that the citizen engagement process has only just begun. The second part of the conference examined the next steps for a healthy citizen engagement process in the coming years. Please see Appendix 'A' for the conference agenda. Appendix 'B' lists the participants.

The conference was not designed to produce a blueprint for action. The objective was to engage participants in a lively exchange of ideas on how best to engage Canadians in this important issue. The ultimate success of this citizen engagement process will play a key role in revitalizing Canada's democratic institutions.

"The Commission wanted to reinforce the idea that the citizen ought to be placed at the centre of governance and viewed as an active participant. He or she should not be the object of regulation or of governance but rather the subject, the maker of governance."

Nathalie Des Rosiers
President, Law Commission of Canada

II. Democratic Renewal and the Issue of Electoral Reform

One theme that emerged from the presentations and discussion is that most Canadians, while disgruntled with the current state of representative democracy, have not yet had the opportunity to discuss and debate the electoral system. How to engage Canadians in the electoral reform debate was a key area of discussion throughout the event.

1. Ongoing Concerns with Winner-Take-All Voting

Participants reviewed materials and heard presentations outlining the perceived problems with the current voting system. The first-past-the-post, the type of winner-take-all voting system used in Canada, disenfranchises large portions of the electorate. Regional differences are exaggerated because a party, whose support is concentrated in one area, will do better than a party whose appeal stretches across the country. For example, the Bloc Quebecois had the fourth highest popular vote in the 1993 federal election yet became the official opposition. The Progressive Conservative party received a larger share of the popular vote in that election yet emerged with only two seats in the House of Commons.

Participants also reviewed how the current voting system routinely distorts what citizens are saying at the ballot box. In the 1996 British Columbia election the NDP placed second with 39% of the popular vote, and yet they received 52% of the seats to form a majority government. The last federal election saw the Liberals win 57% of the seats with only 41% of the vote.

Presentations from various electoral reform groups indicated that most Canadians are generally surprised to learn about the problems created by our current system and that 75 democracies are already using proportional voting systems. The reform groups also suggested that, once aware of the problems and alternatives, citizens quickly embrace the need for change.

2. Media Coverage

Participants also considered that the issue of voting system reform has received an increasing amount of media coverage with articles recently appearing in the Globe and Mail, the Toronto Star, Le Devoir, La Presse and the National Post. Most of the articles, although not all, have been in favour of a more proportional voting system.

William Johnson, columnist with the Globe and Mail and keynote speaker at this conference, expressed the issue this way: "The injustices, the absurdities, the perversities that are wrought by our electoral system are so crying and outrageous that surely we can't just sit back passively and let it be."

It appears that the media are increasingly interested in covering this issue, more so than in past years, when interest diminished after elections were over.

3. Attention by Think Tanks

Another indication of the emergence of this issue, made clear by presenters and the array of print materials, is the increasing engagement of Canadian think tanks. Publications, articles and events on the issue have emerged from such organizations as

the Institute for Research on Public Policy (IRPP), the Fraser Institute, the Centre for Research and Information on Canada (CRIC), the C.D. Howe Institute, the Canada West Foundation, and the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives. As the Centre for Research and Information on Canada notes in its paper *Voter Participation in Canada: Is Canadian Democracy in Crisis?*: “the challenge is to convince citizens that elections matter, either because their own votes make a difference, or because their elected representatives do.”

4. Positions by Civil Society Organizations

In the discussion and presentations, it became clear that a growing number of civil society organizations are beginning to engage the electoral reform issue. The recently formed Fair Vote Canada campaign has received endorsements from a range of organizations that don't normally coalesce around common issues, such as the Canadian Taxpayers Federation, the Ontario Federation of Labour and the Older Women's Network (Ontario).

The electoral reform debate is also receiving increased attention from women's organizations. The organization Equal Voice favours electoral reform as part of its mandate to promote the election of more women. The National Association of Women and the Law has undertaken research on electoral reform. The topic was also a point of discussion at the last convention of the National Association of University Women's Clubs.

Labour groups are becoming more engaged in this issue. For example, a number of national unions and other labour groups have endorsed proportional representation. The Canadian Labour Congress has received dozens of resolutions on electoral reform for its upcoming national convention.

5. Federal Party Positions

Various participants noted that Federal political parties have started to adopt policies that reflect their awareness of a growing concern with the current electoral system. At this most recent national convention, the Canadian Alliance Party adopted an electoral reform policy, including a provision that final decisions should be made by citizens through nation-wide referendum. The Progressive Conservative party will debate an electoral reform policy at its August 2002 convention.

The NDP has a formal position in favour of proportional representation. NDP MP Lorne Nystrom introduced a motion in the last Parliament to have an all-party House of Commons committee travel across the country to hold hearings on this issue and to see if proportional representation could be adopted in Canada.

6. Provincial Government Actions

Presentations from citizens groups in BC and PEI, and an update on the Quebec developments, were the focus of much discussion. In BC and PEI, citizen engagement on electoral reform are being considered, and a consultation process is already underway in Quebec.

The Chief Electoral Officer of PEI recently tabled a report in the Legislature (April 2002) that reviewed systems of proportional representation in other jurisdictions, suggesting the need for a consultation process on alternative systems. Meanwhile, PEI's Premier Binns has suggested that, if public discussion and debate produced a consensus over change, they might consider a referendum, perhaps in conjunction with the next provincial election.

British Columbia's newly elected Liberal government has promised that within the next year it will appoint a Citizens Assembly for Electoral Reform. The Assembly will be responsible for assessing all possible models for electing MLA's including proportional representation, preferential ballots and first-past-the-post. The Assembly will hold public hearings throughout BC, and if it recommends changes to the electoral system, that option will be put to a province-wide referendum.

Quebec's government is currently addressing a wide range of democratic reform issues, including electoral reform. The government has met or will meet with groups of young people, women, cultural groups, community organizations and unions to prepare for a process of debate on the issue. Quebec Premier Bernard Landry told the National Assembly that his government would address the issue of voting reform.

In Ontario's opposition parties, Liberal leader Dalton McGuinty and NDP leader Howard Hampton have both come out in favour of bringing the issue of voting system reform to the citizens of that province.

7. Conclusion: Electoral Reform on the Agenda

Each of the developments summarized in this section suggest that the issue of electoral reform is gaining prominence. This is illustrated by: 1) increasing frustrations caused by the current voting system; 2) increasing media coverage; 3) more focus on electoral reform by leading think tanks; 4) civil society groups taking positions on the issue; 5) federal parties taking positions; and 6) electoral reform programs being actively considered in several provinces. However, the question and challenge is how to engage more Canadians on electoral. The discussion therefore turned to an examination of what electoral reform groups are doing to engage Canadians on this issue.

III. Citizen Engagement: Electoral Reform Groups

The fact that political parties and provincial governments are taking electoral reform more seriously is due in part to the work of citizens' organizations that have formed across Canada. The Law Commission invited representatives from some of those organizations to share the strategies they have employed to engage citizens and other institutions.

Every Vote Counts (PEI): With only two or fewer opposition members elected in three out of the last four Prince Edward Island elections, this organization was inspired, in part, by citizens' movements elsewhere in the world that successfully brought about electoral reform. Its membership now includes politicians (including a former premier) and senior government officials, entrepreneurs, students, academics, and historians, among others.

Fair Voting BC: Over the last five years this group has earned considerable media recognition and spurred growing public awareness and literacy on voting system reform in British Columbia. They have also established a good working relationship with the new provincial Liberal government, which has committed to a citizen engagement process for voting system reform.

Mouvement pour une démocratie nouvelle: Electoral reform activists in Quebec formed MDN as a platform to promote electoral reform, and quickly won multi-partisan support from prominent Quebec political and community leaders. [MDN was not directly represented at the conference. Andre Larocque, a former MDN spokesperson, who agreed to speak on a panel, was subsequently appointed Deputy Minister for the Reform of Democratic Institutions in Quebec, and spoke on behalf of the Quebec government.]

Fair Vote Canada: This multi-partisan citizens organization and campaign was formed one year ago. This nation-wide campaign for voting system reform was recently endorsed by 28 prominent Canadians. The organization also supports the provincial campaigns for electoral reform that are currently underway and is helping initiate campaigns in other provinces.

All of these citizen initiatives developed independently of one another and, with the exception of Fair Voting BC, were formed within the last year. Each group organized in response to the ongoing frustration over the problems and distortions caused by the first-past-the-post voting system, and the growing cynicism amongst voters. When examining the citizen engagement strategies employed by these groups, seven similarities can be identified.

1. Inclusiveness

- ?? Non-partisanship or multi-partisanship. Each group believes that electoral reform is an issue for all people, rising above political ideology, regional, cultural, religious or linguistic differences.
- ?? Broad public consultation. The groups have met with young people, women's groups, cultural groups, unions and a wide array of community organizations to engage people in discussions and debate.

2. Shared Principles

Each group has set out guiding principles for electoral reform. While not identical, they generally follow these basic ideas:

- ?? Broad proportionality: parties should be represented in proportion to the popular vote.
- ?? Extended voter choice and positive voting: citizens should be able to cast a positive and effective vote for the parties they support, rather than feel they should cast a strategic vote against the parties they fear.
- ?? Stable and responsive government: a voting system should support effective government.
- ?? Geographic representation: the system should maintain a link between representatives and geographic constituencies.

3. Access to Information

Each group is focused on public education. Citizens need to understand the problems with the current voting system and become aware of the alternatives.

- ?? The groups have produced numerous writings, books, op/ed pieces, reports, brochures and fact sheets. The groups produce a steady flow of news releases and some popular newspaper columnists are supporting their efforts.
- ?? Each group maintains a website. Fair Voting BC and Fair Vote Canada distribute email newsletters.
- ?? Fair Vote Canada is currently producing a 16 page bilingual tabloid, an introductory plain language guide to the issue, problems, alternatives and the campaign.

4. Public Dialogue

Each group has been reaching out to other organizations, asking them to endorse this campaign, to provide support and get involved. The groups:

- ?? make presentations to community groups, service clubs, libraries, philosophers clubs and other groups;
- ?? host conferences and public forums;
- ?? produce candidate questionnaires and urge constituents to lobby their local MLAs or MPs.

Most of the groups make submissions to legislative committees and other government bodies. Every Vote Counts has an electronic distribution list for members to share information and engage in discussion. Fair Voting BC uses “thinkers” (to make a clear and sound argument), “popularizers” (to communicate effectively) and “activists” (to work the political process).

5. Made-in-Canada Solutions

None of the groups advocate adopting a specific voting system. They believe that citizens need an opportunity to study and review the alternatives. After public discussion and deliberation, a voting system that best fits the needs of Canada (or a specific province) can be developed. The solution may also incorporate elements of the current system. Each group supports a referendum process for decision-making, so that citizens have the final say in choosing the appropriate voting system.

6. Working with Political Parties

Each group is open to working with the political parties to support a process for electoral reform. The provincial groups have developed good relationships with governing and opposition parties. Over the next two years FVC hopes to form fair voting caucuses within each of the federal political parties.

IV. Citizen Engagement: Other Advocacy Groups

The Law Commission of Canada invited five very experienced and successful social policy advocates, who have worked on a variety of issues, to discuss the strategies they have used for generating public awareness and participation. This panel session provided an opportunity to examine various engagement strategies that might be useful for stimulating discussion and debate about the electoral system. The presenters on this panel were as follows:

Hannah Evans: Civic engagement expert whose work and research is related to civil society and community revitalization. She is a senior policy advisor on partnerships and consultation for the Ontario Government.

Heidi Rathjen: Co-founder and Campaign Director for the Quebec Coalition for Tobacco Control and the co-founder and Executive Director for the Canadian Coalition for Gun Control.

Troy Lanigan: National Communications Director for the Canadian Taxpayers Federation.

Steven Staples: Issue Campaign Coordinator for the Council of Canadians.

Duff Conacher: Coordinator for Democracy Watch.

The following six categories summarize the key points that were raised during their presentations.

1. Working with Government: Community consultation has become commonplace in Canada, but since the public is so diverse, disparate and difficult to define, the government is required to make certain assumptions as it faces the challenge of identifying counterparts in civil society. Governments generally work from the following assumptions when engaging in community consultation.

- ?? Citizen involvement in decision-making processes results in better, more equitable decisions taken in the public interest.
- ?? Communities become stronger through community engagement. The more communities are able to organize and participate in public life, the stronger the society is.
- ?? Civic organizations and civil society are better suited than traditional political institutions for consultation on issues of collective concern.
- ?? Through public consultation and public engagement social cohesion is improved.

When developing a consultation process, however, there are always a number of problems or challenges to be faced.

- ?? Government will be concerned that the groups they deal with are accountable to their constituents, that participants are knowledgeable and well informed,

and that the civic partner is united and coherent with legible structures and leaders.

- ?? Where there is no apparent civic partner, the government may be tempted to appoint a partner. Recognition by the state is dependent on the internal capacity of a civic organization or community group, but is also dependent on the prerogative of officials who select partners.
- ?? Some marginalized groups may not be deemed worthy of consultation. Communities that exist because of conflict and exclusion, like sex workers and drug users, for example, are seen as victims or criminals and not as partners in community consultation.
- ?? During and after a consultation process, it is difficult to reconcile competing demands. Collectively they represent a range of equal and often opposing goods, and consultation in itself will not resolve differences.

2. Effective Structure

The presenters all emphasized the need for an effective organizational and campaign structure.

- ?? An organization or organized campaign is the means for identifying and bringing together supporters of the cause.
- ?? The campaign objectives must be very clear, and should be presented in a manner that makes it easy for other organizations to endorse.
- ?? Campaigns and organizations must be built simultaneously. Concentrate on achieving campaign and policy goals while at the same time building a constituency of people that are supportive of those values. Organize to educate – educate to organize.

3. Framing the Issue

This is a first step, and one of the most important, in planning a citizen engagement process. Framing defines an issue so it relates to the needs or the concerns of a wide range of people.

- ?? Frame the issue to ensure a broad appeal. The next government may reverse any policy gains unless you have a strong base of citizen support.
- ?? Relate the issue to values that Canadians share, such as tolerance, generosity and collective responsibility.

4. Tools to Communicate

Successful campaigns require a number of approaches to communicate messages.

- ?? Provide sample letters or your message with phone numbers to call. Give people the means to get involved.
- ?? Letters and phone calls to elected representatives can be very effective. E-mail is less effective, as MPs and MLAs have difficulty replying to overwhelming volumes.
- ?? Petitions open the opportunity to discuss the issues, provide an immediate action for people to take, and help identify supporters for future activities.

However, they are not particularly useful for actually influencing government opinion (they help in developing a database of supporters).

- ?? Demonstrations may not be productive, unless they can continue to build over time and grow in size. Many Canadians view them as inappropriate civil disobedience, even when they are peaceful and lawful. Violence is never appropriate.
- ?? Publicity gained by articulate and competent spokespeople is less expensive than advertising and arguably far more effective. Spokespeople can make presentations, speak at events, produce reports and be available for media comment.
- ?? Advertising is expensive but allows direct control of the message to help engage the public and spur action. Ads can also direct people to sources of further information (e.g., a web site).

5. Mobilizing People

The presenters emphasized the importance of developing and nurturing strong relationships with citizens who wish to be involved in a campaign.

- ?? People need to feel good about their participation. Positive feedback encourages people to do more. Letters or notes of appreciation and certificates of recognition are helpful.
- ?? Successes should be celebrated when ever possible. Any movement forward is a cause for celebration.
- ?? Campaigns should have no barriers or fees to become a member. Citizen engagement is based on enthusiastic, involved citizens.
- ?? People must accept responsibility and be prepared to undertake activities that will lead to the campaign objectives.
- ?? Those who are involved must encourage others to join, to attend events, write letters to politicians and newspapers, call talk shows, distribute materials or publications, and distribute petitions.
- ?? Many young people are politically engaged, but not in traditional forms of civic engagement. They may be more attuned to Internet organized activities and protests.

6. Mobilizing Funds

Civic engagement can be costly, so civil society groups must mobilize financial resources.

- ?? Funding from individuals is better than funding from corporations, unions or governments. The engagement of a strong base of supportive citizens is more important in the long term than that of temporary leaders of large institutions who may or may not be truly representative of their constituencies.
- ?? Many organizations and campaigns use direct mail campaigns to develop supporters. One organization represented at the conference knocks on tens of thousands of doors each year, makes presentations, and asks for donations and support.
- ?? The specific capabilities of a citizens group will be determined by its budget (e.g., a low budget will allow you to develop cost-effective coalitions via e-mail, while

high end budgets would allow an organization to develop sophisticated programs, such as deliberative judgment polling, or television advertising / paid advertising initiatives.

V. Lessons from Other Countries

Conference participants heard and discussed a presentation from Dennis Pilon, York University, author of “Citizen Engagement and Voting System Reform: Lessons from Around the World,” a paper published by the Law Commission of Canada. His review of both historic and very recent experiences with electoral reform in various countries led to a number of conclusions that will be relevant to citizen engagement in Canada.

Existing institutional arrangements matter: Electoral reform has to relate to the institutions within the particular country. Models from other countries cannot be imported without adapting them to local needs. Canadian electoral reform will require a made-in-Canada solution.

The mobilization of public opinion matters: A base of citizens must support the change. Today, most Canadians do not associate the voting system with their concerns and frustrations with government. Citizens will have to learn why the voting system matters.

Political parties matter: The evidence suggests that political parties are not only important, but are central to the change process. Political parties play a key role in determining what kinds of democratic institutions are sustained or not sustained.

Civil society organizations matter: If the media loses interest or political parties are trying to avoid the issue, civil society organizations will be the key determinant on whether the issue will eventually be addressed.

The methods of citizen engagement matter: Three factors were important in the successful citizen engagement process used in New Zealand, which led to the adoption of a new voting system: An independent fact-finding commission; an independent educative body; and, the availability of resources (e.g., materials were readily available on voting system alternatives, which allowed citizens to become informed and engage in an intelligent civic discussion).

A clear question and a clear referendum process matter. Ideally, the process should culminate with a clear referendum process that allows citizens to understand the alternatives, the implications of their choices, and make an informed decision.

VI. Framing the Issue

How can the issue of democratic renewal, and particularly electoral reform, be framed in a context that is relevant to a wide range of people? This was one of the key questions put to conference participants who were organized into breakout groups.

What emerged from these brainstorming sessions was an appreciation that there are no simple solutions. The ideas that were expressed were as diverse as the backgrounds of

the participants. That in itself may indicate that framing the issue of electoral reform may become quite dependent upon the audience being addressed. It could be that a general message is required, but it must also be tailored to speak to the specific concerns and issues of individual groups and organizations, marginalized people, and to our political representatives. The following summarizes some of the key comments and ideas on how the issue can be framed for various audiences.

Framing the Issue for:

1. Individual Canadians and Broad Coalitions

- ?? The issues of fair voting and fair democratic representation are central to the idea of democracy.
- ?? Electoral reform can be summarized with simple messages. For example, “Make Every Vote Count” is a slogan that speaks to everyone.
- ?? Representative democracy means that the elected representatives who form the government represent a majority of the voters. That is not happening under the first-past-the-post voting system.
- ?? Start by focusing on the defects in the current system, not the solutions. Promoting a more proportional voting system should be secondary to ensuring that people understand the current voting system is just not working for Canadians.
- ?? Emphasize that, by engaging in deliberation about new voting systems, citizens can help create the kind of democracy they want.

2. Groups and Organizations

- ?? The introduction of fair democratic representation will expand the diversity of issues considered by government. Many groups feel their views and issues are undervalued and excluded by the political system. A fair voting system might ensure that all views receive appropriate representation.

3. Marginalized People

- ?? This issue has great potential to help address the concerns of marginalized groups, aboriginals, women, visible minorities and new Canadians. Marginalization often flows from poor representation in the political system. Electoral reform might help address those imbalances.
- ?? Success stories can be used to speak to marginalized groups. One example is how the introduction of a proportional voting system for New York City School Boards led to proportional representation of the ethnic diversity of New York City. The new voting system helped remove barriers to fair representation.

4. Political Parties

- ?? Political parties are absolutely crucial integrators in a mass society. Electoral reform is about improving, not de-emphasizing, their role.
- ?? Electoral reform should be a win/win for both citizens and politicians. Canadians are increasingly disconnected from their political institutions and more

dissatisfied with their political representatives. Electoral reform provides a way to fix those problems.

- ?? A voting system based on positive voting would allow political parties to build a support base with some continuity and consistency.

5. Addressing Common Misperceptions

- ?? Opponents often say parliaments created through proportional representation are ineffective, ignoring the fact that most major democracies use proportional representation and function effectively.
- ?? The first-past-the-post model presupposes a majority government with an alternative government in waiting. That isn't working in Canada. Many other voting systems presuppose consensual politics, where parties work together to get things accomplished through coalitions.

VII. Engaging Citizens

The second round of brainstorming sessions asked the same groups of participants to discuss methods for engaging citizens on electoral reform. How should limited resources be applied to promote citizen engagement? What are the most efficient and effective means of creating a public dialogue on this issue?

The comments on methods of public education, citizen engagement, and community organizing techniques, were both wide-ranging and insightful. The ideas seemed to fall into two categories. The first category was how to engage citizens on electoral reform. These comments and ideas are grouped under three categories: plain language materials, the Internet, and public opinion surveys.

The second general category was who to engage – the individuals and groups that advocates need to work with. These ideas and comments are grouped into three categories: the media, political parties and civil society groups. Participants seemed to place the greatest emphasis on engaging civil society groups as the best way to reach grassroots Canadians.

How to Engage:

1. Plain language materials:

- ?? Most materials on the subject of electoral reform are written for academics and policy makers. There is an urgent need to produce materials in plain language.
- ?? A video should be prepared and presented to various groups, particularly for those who are not comfortable with written material.

2. The Internet

- ?? This will be a key tool, both for advocacy work and public education. More and more people are going to the web for their information (especially youth).
- ?? A web site can have dedicated regional discussion boards to promote civic deliberation.
- ?? For advocacy work, a web site can have an electronic chain letter petition.

3. Public opinion surveys

- ?? Public opinion surveys can illustrate the frustrations with the current voting system and the public's readiness for alternatives.
- ?? Polls have already shown the ideas of proportionality and fair representation resonate with Canadians as positive political values.
- ?? Polls have also shown the need for further education, as the majority of Canadians think a majority popular vote is required to form a majority government, a fundamental misunderstanding of the way the current system works.
- ?? Deliberative polling can help educate and gauge the attitudes of citizens.
- ?? Exit polls can be organized across the country. Results can help determine the public readiness for electoral change.

Who To Engage:

4. Media

- ?? While individual journalists are already interested in this issue, there is a need for ongoing coverage and editorial support.
- ?? Electoral reform groups need a spokesperson assigned to the parliamentary press gallery to maintain a continual presence in Ottawa. This representative should be seen as an expert, someone that politicians and the media will turn to when the issue finally breaks.
- ?? The issue must be taken to the producers of various television shows.
- ?? Electoral reform developments in the provinces can be turned into an interesting national news story.

5. Political parties

- ?? Opposition parties and politicians should be reached and convinced to support electoral reform before they gain power.
- ?? Riding associations can take a resolution to a regional convention, have it carried forward to a provincial convention, and then to the national level of the party.
- ?? Advocates should develop a 12 to 18 month education plan for party activists from all of the political parties.
- ?? Electoral reform advocates should do everything possible to make this an election issue in the next federal campaign.

6. Civil society groups

- ?? Citizen engagement will require a strong grass roots effort to spread the word.
- ?? To reach activists in non-profit organizations, meet with the executive director, then meet with their board, then get on the annual meeting agenda and relate electoral reform to the particular concerns of the organization.
- ?? Different position papers should be tailored to address different interest groups.
- ?? A speakers network should be formed to attend meetings of groups as small as 10 or 20 people.

- ?? The focus for the next 12 months should be on face-to-face community organizing, so that in 24 months there is a strong and meaningful network in place.
- ?? An outreach program is needed to reach organizations that are respected by and trusted by marginalized groups. Electoral reform groups and others can provide resources for their discussions.
- ?? Outreach to civil society groups must go beyond the leadership. It is necessary to give ownership of the issue to the members. The membership in turn will help keep the leadership involved.
- ?? Reach Aboriginal leaders who have an interest in the political system so that they can promote dialogue within their communities.

VIII. Conclusion

With Canadians increasingly cynical and less satisfied with their political system, the issue of democratic renewal and electoral reform are becoming increasingly important. The problems that exist are indeed cause for concern, but the opportunities for citizen engagement are a reason for hope.

Canadians are starting to become informed about the electoral reform debate, but there is clearly much more that needs to be done. The Adjointe du Directeur Général des Elections for Quebec, Francine Barry, and the Chief Electoral Officer of Canada, Jean-Pierre Kingsley, brought a sense of the enormity of the task at hand when they spoke to participants midway through the conference.

Given Quebec's experience with electoral reform, Francine Barry concluded that "reform will take place eventually, it's realistic in theory and practice." Jean-Pierre Kingsley pointed out that mathematically there can be no perfect voting system and there will need to be compromise. The alternatives must be studied carefully and the public educated. There are also financial impacts and legal issues to be considered. The present system should not be discarded without valid reasons and a clear understanding of the alternatives.

While challenges exist, they are clearly not insurmountable. Kingsley noted that political parties could play an essential role in the electoral reform process. They may provide a "short cut" to address this issue more quickly. The media will also play an important role in promoting consideration of a new voting system.

The most important role of all in this process is the ordinary citizen. If citizen participation is to remain fundamental to our idea of democracy, then Canadians need to be sufficiently engaged to undertake this task of democratic renewal and electoral reform.

IX. Appendix 'A': Agenda



Renewing Democracy: Citizen Engagement in Voting System Reform

April 25- 26, 2002

**Government Conference Centre
Sussex Room
2 Rideau Street
Ottawa, Ontario**

Guided by the notion that fundamental reforms to democratic institutions must be publicly inclusive, this forum will bring together a diverse group of experienced and recognized leaders and experts from a wide variety of organizations and constituencies.

The objective of the forum is to examine methods for engaging Canadians on issues associated with the current electoral system and its reform. To accomplish this, forum attendees will be provided in advance with background materials that outline the main issues associated with voting systems and electoral reform. Participants will help identify and discuss “best practices”, or strategies that they have found useful in generating public interest and knowledge in other areas. These insights will be based on their experiences with public consultation and civic engagement within their respective areas of concern.

The proceedings of the forum will provide a valuable tool for those interested in examining methods for engaging citizens in discussions and debates about Canada's electoral system and its reform.

Thursday, April 25, 2002

- 5:00 p.m. Reception
- 5:30 p.m. Welcome: Nathalie Des Rosiers, President, Law Commission of Canada
- 5:45 p.m. Dinner
- 6:45 p.m. Guest Speaker: William Johnson, Columnist, *The Globe and Mail*
“The Opportunities for and Implications of Electoral Reform.”
- 7:30 p.m. Panel: Electoral Reform Advocacy Groups – Plans and Approaches

This panel will examine the strategies that four voting system reform groups have employed in their attempts to stimulate public interest.

- ?? Jeannie Lea, Every Vote Counts (PEI)
- ?? Larry Gordon, Fair Vote Canada
- ?? André Larocque, Deputy Minister, Reform of Democratic Institutions, Quebec
- ?? Nick Loenen, Fair Voting BC

8:15 p.m. Questions and comments from participants

9:00 p.m. Adjourn

Friday, April 26, 2002

8:00 a.m. Continental Breakfast

8:20 a.m. Announcements

8:30 a.m. Panel: Engaging Citizens: Perspectives from Other Advocacy Groups

This panel will include representatives from various advocacy groups. Presentations will focus on the strategies that these groups have developed and initiated to generate public awareness and participation

- ?? Hannah Evans, Citizen Engagement Expert
- ?? Heidi Rathjen, Quebec Coalition for Tobacco Control
- ?? Troy Lanigan, Canadian Taxpayers Federation
- ?? Steven Staples, Council of Canadians
- ?? Duff Conacher, Democracy Watch

9:45 a.m. Health Break

10:00 a.m. Moderated Discussion Groups: Framing the Issue

The purpose of these discussion groups is to examine how democratic renewal and particularly electoral reform can be relevant to Canadians, including under-represented constituencies in the current system of representative democracy.

11:00 a.m. Discussion Reports

11:30 a.m. Presentation: Dennis Pilon, York University

“Citizen Engagement and Voting System Reform: Lessons from Around the World”

12:00 p.m. Lunch

- 1:00 p.m. Lunch Speakers
- Jean-Pierre Kingsley, Directeur Général, élections du Canada
- Francine Barry, Adjointe du Directeur Général des Élections
Directeur Général des Élections du Québec
- 2:00 p.m. Moderated Discussion Groups: Engaging Citizens
- The purpose of these breakout sessions is to discuss methods for engaging citizens on electoral reform. What public education, citizen engagement and community organization techniques would best apply?
- 3:15 p.m. Health Break
- 4:00 p.m. Pulling It Together: Conclusions
- Facilitators will summarize areas of general agreement and ideas for further consideration.
- 4:15 p.m. Final comments and questions from participants
- 4:30 p.m. Closing remarks: Nathalie Des Rosiers, President, Law Commission of Canada

IX. Appendix 'B': List of Participants

Jacque Ackerly
Past-President
End Legislated Poverty in Vancouver

Doris H. Anderson
Fair Vote Canada

Francine Barry
Adjointe du Directeur General des
Elections

Steven Bittle
Research Officer
Law Commission of Canada

Bruno Bonneville
Executive Director
Law Commission of Canada

Genevieve Bouchard
Research Director
Institute for Research on Public Policy

Alan Buchanan
Commissioner
Law Commission of Canada

Ralph Calhoun
Canada's Association of the Fifty-Plus

Anna Chiappa
Executive Director
Canadian Ethnocultural Council

Bernard Colas
Commissaire
Commission du droit du Canada

Duff Conacher
Democracy Watch

Michael Conlon
National Researcher
Canadian Federation of Students

Wendy Cornet
Advisor, Governance Initiative Secretariat
Congress of Aboriginal Peoples

Lisa Dale
Chair, Women's Caucus
Fair Vote Canada

Diane Davidson
Premiere conseillere juridique et
Directrice executive a la planification
strategique et aux affaires
intergouvernementales
Elections Canada

Nicole de Seve
Conseillere
Centrale des syndicats du Quebec

Nathalie Des Rosiers
Presidente
Commission du droit du Canada

John Deverell
Labour for Fair Voting
Fair Vote Canada

Hannah Evans
Civic Engagement Expert

Dave Farthing
Youth Canada Association (YOU CAN)

Alfred J. Gray
Policy Analyst
National Association of Friendship Centres

Larry Gordon
Fair Vote Canada

Jean-Pierre Kingsley
Chief Electoral Officer of Canada
Elections Canada

Troy Lanigan
National Communications Director
Canadian Taxpayers Federation

Jeannie Lea
Every Vote Counts

Lillian Morgenthau
President
Canada's Association of the Fifty-Plus

Nancy Peckford
National Association of Women and the
Law

Dennis Pilon
Department of Political Science
York University

Judy Rebick
Publisher and Author

Leslie Seidle
Research Associate
Canadian Policy Research Networks

Steve Staples
Council of Canadians

Gregory Tardi
Legal Counsel
House of Commons

Gail Turner
National Council
Fair Vote Canada

William Johnson
The Globe and Mail

Pat Kerwin
Political Affairs Director
Canadian Labour Congress

Andre Larocque
Secrétaire général associé
Ministère du Conseil exécutif
Secrétariat à la réforme des institutions
démocratiques

Nick Loenen
Fair Voting British Columbia

Dr. Andrew Parkin
Assistant Director
Centre for Research and Information on
Canada

Alain Pelletier
Directeur adjoint, politique et recherche
Elections Canada

Heidi Rathjen
Quebec Coalition for Tobacco Control

Dr. Bryan Schwartz
Faculty of Law
University of Manitoba

Rosemary Speirs
Equal Voice

Pat Steenberg
Canadian Ecumenical Justice Initiative

Lynne Toupin
CEO
Canadian Cooperative Association

Norman A Villegas Jr.
Forum for Young Canadians

Julian West
National Director
Fair Vote Canada

Christopher Wilson
Manager, National Political Affairs
Co-operative Housing Association of
Canada