



NDP MP Nathan Cullen at the Special Committee on Electoral Reform with former NDP leader Ed Broadbent and committee chair Francis Scarpaleggia. Hugh Pouliot photo

The Case for Proportional Representation

Nathan Cullen

As one of two NDP MPs on the Special Committee on Electoral Reform, Nathan Cullen supports his party's position that Canada should adopt a system of proportional representation—an option that, had it been in place in 2015, would have given the NDP 68 seats rather than the 44 it won. Cullen cites the committee itself as an example of the benefits of PR.

Canada is a vast and diverse country, with many regional, cultural and linguistic identities at play. We are made stronger because of that diversity and richness and have welcomed profound changes to our national story over the generations.

Some have linked our success to our antiquated voting system but I argue we have been successful in spite that system, not because of it.

We are a principled people and we are also open to compromise and cooperation. So why is it that, in the 21st century, Canada is still using a winner-takes-all, adversarial approach to electing people to represent us? It was designed in medieval times and hasn't changed fundamentally in 150 years.

For those concerned that voting reform is moving too quickly, it bears mentioning that Canada's Parliament first started debating this issue in 1921. If you thought glaciers were slow-moving, "glacial" doesn't begin to describe the pace of this debate.

Since 1977, more than a dozen high-level studies have been undertaken on electoral reform in Canada. Whether citizens' assemblies or federal or provincial commissions, all of them recommended one key change: we need a proportional voting system.

Before, during, and after the 2015 election, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau's promise to Canadians was black and white: the 2015 election would be the last election under the first-past-the-post (FPTP) electoral system. In June 2015, Trudeau channeled his inner New Democrat when he said, "We need to know that when we cast a ballot, it counts; that when we vote, it matters. I'm proposing that we make every vote count."

Canadians are rightfully excited about the prospects for electoral reform. Most recently, they watched four years of Stephen Harper's rampant abuse of his parliamentary majority—won with only 39 per cent of the popular vote. The danger of the so-called "false majority" to brazenly pursue a narrow-minded agenda that is deeply out of step with the views of the overwhelming majority of Canadians has never been so powerfully demonstrated as it was under Harper.

But the history of Canada's democracy is rife with examples of the distortions and abuses that can happen under FPTP.

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of them were earned with an actual majority of votes, and the most recent was over 30 years ago, by Brian Mulroney in 1984.

First-past-the-post (FPTP) also has a bizarre tendency to make the loser the winner. In 1979, the Liberals won the popular vote but lost the election to Joe Clark's Progressive Conservatives. Similarly, second place took the prize in provincial elections in Saskatchewan (1986), British Columbia (1996), New Brunswick (2006) and three times in Quebec (1944, 1966, 1998).

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At every open mic session the electoral reform committee has held, we invariably hear from Canadians who steadfastly performed their demo-

cratic duty. They went out and cast ballots in 10, 15, or even 20 elections and not once has their vote ever counted. This widespread perception of powerlessness has been identified by Elections Manitoba as a major factor in non-voters in their most recent election.

What we have repeatedly heard from Canadians in parliamentary hearings in Ottawa and at open mics on the road across the country is this: they want the Parliament they elect to reflect the country that we are. They want their vote to count no matter where they live, or whom they choose to vote for.

They want strong local representation yet they're tired of a system whose only real virtue is its consistent ability to churn out single-party ruling majorities that don't represent a majority of the population.

As the debate has picked up around the country, many Canadians are tuning in and realizing that there's nothing permanent or immovable about our current outdated and unfair system. They're seeing a rare window of opportunity to evolve our voting system and create a more representative and collaborative Parliament that accurately reflects how the population voted.

They're also seeing that most modern and successful democracies in the world use a proportional representation (PR) system—where people can vote for what they want, and actually see it reflected in their government once all the ballots are all counted.

The Conservatives have been calling for a referendum on electoral

reform. They rightly argue that the voting system doesn't belong to political parties or politicians but to the people we seek to represent. Validating whatever reform we recommend is almost as important as the recommendation itself.

Yet only focusing on this one issue allows the discussion to lose sight of why we are even having this conversation in the first place. According to an Abacus survey taken in December, 83 percent of Canadians think our voting system is in need of some kind of reform.

As MPs, our job is to respond to that call for change and to work together, across party lines, to create a made-in-Canada solution. The Liberals' decision to adopt the NDP's proposal to form the committee on the basis of how Canadians voted in the last election was a good start that continues to serve us well.

The same Abacus study also gave us insights about what Canadians want to see in reform: seat counts that match the popular vote more closely, ballots that are simple, and that the governments elected should be stable and able to govern.

It's increasingly difficult for opponents of reform to ignore why opinion polls like these and the many studies conducted in Canada all point towards a proportional system as the best solution for our country.

At the most basic level, it's a more fair and effective way of representing the views and aspirations of the country as a whole. And it's simple: if your party gets about 30 per cent of the vote, you get about 30 per cent of the seats.

Throughout the fall, this sentiment was nearly unanimous as Canadians came out to speak to the committee in cities and towns from coast to coast to coast.

If we view this debate through the lens of what Canadians want in their voting system, the direction becomes clear.

Canadians want to be empowered by their voting system. A proportional system would make every vote count, while systems like FPTP and "alternative voting", send half or more of the ballots to the dustbin. Countries with proportional systems also have as much as a 7.5 per cent higher voter turnout, and much better representation of women and minorities in the legislature.

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Canadians want their politicians to work together for the long-term benefit of the country and not the short-term interests of their parties. Countries with PR tend to outperform in policy innovation and also discourage political pandering through quick-fix policy responses. In the absence of what political scientists call "policy lurch"—whereby newly-elected parties spend years simply reversing the previous government's agenda—governments can focus on a proactive, coherent, long-term vision. That's why, for example, in countries with proportional representation, we tend to see more prosperous economies, where carbon emissions are going down, and much higher scores on the UN Human Development Index.

The committee studying electoral reform is actually a perfect living example of how a proportional system can work in Canada. We have effective representation from every party in the Commons with a broad regional

and linguistic mix of members. Because no party holds a majority, no one holds all the power; compromise and cooperation are essential and natural parts of the process. Everyone won't always get exactly what they want, but because we're willing to compromise, we're able to make serious progress in the areas we have common ground.

The government should be credited for having conceded to this proportional and collaborative model. For Canadians looking for a sneak peek into a future where power is more evenly shared, this committee may be showing the way.

Finally, Canadians want governments that are responsive to their priorities, not just the priorities of one political party and the backroom of the Prime Minister's Office. Too often, majority governments in Canada have been able to pursue their own narrow agendas unchecked, with as little as 35 per cent of the popular vote.

A voting system that corresponds to contemporary Canadian reality is within reach right now. The path to reform will not be easy, but worthwhile achievements seldom are.

It's time for MPs—and Liberal MPs in particular—to show courage and belief in this endeavor; to be bold, and to work together to achieve something truly historic for the Canadian people and their democracy.

Let's have a political culture in this country that reflects the diversity, richness and cooperative nature of its people. **P**

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