



HOUSE OF COMMONS
CHAMBRE DES COMMUNES
CANADA

Jonathan Wilkinson, MP North Vancouver

Dear Constituents of North Vancouver,

This week, the federal government announced it would not be moving forward, at the present time, to change Canada's current electoral system. This will be a disappointing decision for those in North Vancouver for whom this issue is of importance. I count myself among them.

The Liberal Party ran on a platform that included a commitment that we would move to change the electoral system - from the current "first past-the post" to another system. What this "other system" would be, was left for discussion amongst political parties and amongst Canadians post-election.

Personally, I was clear throughout the election campaign and subsequent to the campaign that I was in favour of changing the current electoral system. I continue to believe that the system we currently use is inherently flawed and that better alternatives exist.

However, during the 2015 campaign and subsequent to it, I have also been very clear that I did not believe that one Party could – or should – unilaterally change the electoral system. For one Party to do so on its own would invite legitimate criticism that such a change was being made solely to further the interests of that particular Party. Such a change would be abhorrent to Canadian's sense of fairness and to the idea of democratic process itself.

A country's electoral system is intimately tied to issues of democratic process and democratic integrity. To change the electoral system in Canada does, in my mind, thus require agreement and support amongst at least two of Canada's three major parties.

Unfortunately, achieving consensus between the Parties and achieving consensus amongst the Canadian public as a whole has not been possible over this past year.

Amongst those Canadians for whom electoral reform is a key issue, neither I nor the government could detect a consensus as to a path forward. During the Town Hall I held here in North Vancouver, in the volume of phone calls I received, in meetings I held that related to this issue and in the correspondence I received, the broad conclusion I reached is that there are many folks who support the idea of changing the system, but there is no agreement on what should replace the current system. Some folks support one or more variants of proportional representation (and there are many variants). Others supported a preferential ballot. And there also were many who continue to support use of the existing electoral system.



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With respect to Canadians generally, for those concerned about electoral reform, the vast majority agree on the need for reform of the current system. However, after significant outreach by a Parliamentary Committee, the Minister of Democratic Reform, individual MPs, and an electronic survey, only a very, very small fraction of Canadians “weighed in” on this issue. Clearly, through their actions, Canadians told us that this matter was of relatively low significance when compared to other crucial issues such as jobs, economic growth, trade, health care and climate change.

With regard to Canada’s major political parties, a significant attempt was made by parliamentarians of all political stripes to find a basis for consensus. The Parliamentary Committee in particular worked extremely hard. However, the bottom line is that even after an enormous amount of work and consultation across the country, there was no consensus on which electoral system Canada should adopt. The NDP supported a particular form of proportional representation. The Conservatives opposed any change. Liberal MPs held views that ranged from many who supported a preferential ballot system to some who supported modified versions of proportional representation.

To change a country’s electoral system does, in my mind, require greater support than just one Party. If the Liberal Government, as a majority government, tried to ram through a change of this magnitude with so many competing voices and opinions, there would, quite rightly, be outrage on the part of many Canadians.

The lack of any reasonable consensus – even as between two of the major political parties – was absolutely debilitating on an issue like this.

Some folks have suggested that the government could have driven forward in the absence of any cross party agreement, to force a referendum on the country. This was indeed an option. However, this type of route needs to be put into some context. Is debating the Canadian electoral system and fighting over this issue really what Canadians want to be focused on and want their political leaders to be focused on over the next 12-18 months?

At a time of great economic uncertainty with regard to international affairs, with regard to trade and with regard to the economy, is a divisive referendum campaign that potentially pits Canadians against each other, one that distracts us from priorities that would include creating economic growth, ensuring a productive trading relationship with the United States, enhancing international trade more generally, fighting climate change, addressing poverty in Canada and addressing some of



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the critical needs of indigenous communities - really worth it at this point? Is it really of sufficiently high priority relative to these other critical issues?

The answer of this government is, no, not at this time.

Governments should be accountable for the platforms on which they campaign. It is however essential that as circumstances change, as views are clarified and as new issues and realities emerge, governments must also be flexible. A responsible government and a healthy democratic process must be prepared for the possibility that priorities and campaign promises are subject to re-evaluation if in fact circumstances change. This is a critical element to the effective functioning of a parliamentary democracy.

Another critical element is that we, as MPs, will be held accountable for such decisions by voters at election time. Voters will need to “weigh in” on whether the logic of the government and the priorities it has decided upon are reasonable and appropriate given the current context.

I and my colleagues should not be, and are not, pretending that we have not moved away from a campaign commitment. We have. This letter is intended to provide an explanation as to why and to ensure that folks understand that such a decision was not taken lightly.

I would also say that the announcement this week does not, in my mind, mark the end of the conversation regarding electoral reform and democratic reform more generally.

With regard to electoral reform, I intend to continue the discussion of this matter with my colleagues from all parties to see if, over the medium term, we may come up with ideas and concepts that could enable the emergence of a broader consensus. I remain convinced that the current electoral system has significant flaws and I remain very interested in seeing if we can find a path that will enable us to improve upon this system.

With regard to democratic reform more generally, there is far more to democratic reform than just the matter of the system we use to count votes. Reforming how Parliamentary Committees do their work to empower them, changing the appointment process for federal agency boards and commissions to take away partisan influences and reforming how Senators are appointed (also to remove partisan influence) are all areas where this government has made considerable progress.



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Additionally, this government has already introduced legislation to repeal undemocratic elements of the previous government's Fair Elections Act – to ensure broad participation in Canada's electoral process.

For those of you who have questions, concerns or thoughts about this is, I am very happy to discuss with you in person. I would invite you to contact my constituency office to set up a time to come in to chat.

Jonathan Wilkinson
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