The Road to Electoral Reform

By Dave G. Stewart

The Values that Canadians hold important in an electoral system are coming under review as the Electoral Reform/Reform Electoral Committee (ERRE) has begun its work. Since MP Mark Gerretsen's Kingston and the Islands Town Hall is days away - Thursday, September 15 in Memorial Hall, it's a good time to focus on the systems that are being considered for voting, beginning with the 2019 poll.

The Committee’s Guiding Principles are that Canadians want a system to:

- Restore the effectiveness and legitimacy of voting, such as reducing distortions and strengthening the link between voter intention and the electoral result
- Encourage greater engagement and participation in the democratic process, including by underrepresented groups
- Support accessibility and inclusiveness of all eligible voters, and avoiding undue complexity in the voting process
- Safeguard the integrity of our voting process
- Preserve the accountability of local representation

Committee History

The Special Parliamentary Committee on Electoral Reform was struck on June 21st, 2016. Its 12 members roughly reflect the proportion of seats that each official party holds in the House of Commons, plus Elizabeth May and the Bloc Quebecois. This fulfilled the second specific clause in the Honourable Minister of Democratic Institutions, Maryam Monsef’s mandate letter to “Bring forward a proposal to establish a special parliamentary committee to consult on electoral reform, including preferential ballots, proportional representation, mandatory voting and online voting.”

The committee began its consultations with experts shortly after. Meetings can be observed on the Cable Public Affairs Channel (CPAC). The Committee’s Twitter hashtag is #ERRE, and you can get actively involved in the questions put to experts through this medium.

Education and consultation beyond the ERRE Committee meetings has been encouraged. Members of Parliament were invited to ask for Constituent feedback through Constituency Town Halls. Consultations end on October 14, with the Committee’s report due to Parliament in early December.

Majoritarian Family of Voting Systems

These are “winner-take-all” systems, including First-Past the Post (FPTP) and Alternative Vote (AV).

FPTP - we are all familiar with the system that has served Canada for the first 149 years. The candidate who gets more votes than any other candidate in the riding is the winner. The percentage of votes required for success varies with the number of contestants in the riding. Surprisingly FPTP is used in few developed countries. Learn more about FPTP on the ERRE Committee’s Electoral Systems Fact Sheet page.

AV - should also be very familiar to Liberals, since it has been used to select our (and other parties’) candidates for a number of years. The Fact Sheet outlines how AV works, using a “ranked” or “preferential” ballot to ensure that at least fifty percent (50%) of the constituents voting in a riding have shown a preference for the winning candidate.

The voter is given the opportunity to rank the candidates listed on their ballot in order of preference. Their number-one choice is counted, and remains the sole choice until either, s/he gets more than 50% of the vote (and is elected), or is eliminated as the lowest-polling candidate left in the race. If s/he is eliminated, and no one else has won, then the vote goes to the remaining candidate that they had ranked highest on their ballot.
Proportional Family of Voting Systems

This is a large and diverse family of systems. The Proportional Family includes multiple variations of Single Transferable Vote (STV), Mixed Member Proportional (MMP), and List Proportional Representation. The Fact Sheet further breaks this “Family” down into sub-groups called “Proportional” and “Mixed” Electoral Systems.

Proportional systems are in use in more than three quarters of developed countries. The shared goal of all proportional systems is closely align the support for each party with the percentage of seats it receives. Please go back to the Fact Sheet to see what some of the systems are and where they are used.

A Brief Note about the Preferential Ballot

It is important to take some time to understand the possible roll of the preferential, instant run-off or ranked ballot. It is not a system of voting, but a tool that can be used in both majoritarian (i.e. Alternative Vote), and proportional systems.

This tool is very effective in maximizing the number of voters who will be represented by someone for whom they voted within a single race, or riding. Thus it’s effective for the selection of a Candidate to represent the party at election time (as we have done for years).

Across a country, it does not ensure that the percentage of vote that a party gets nationally will be reflected in the number of seats that a party has in the House of Commons. It does not, on its own, make every vote count. It continues to allow “False Majorities” (50% + of the seats with less than 50% of the popular vote). This is not the case in countries using proportional systems - some have minority governments, but most have majority coalitions made up of parties which agree to a common set of policy objectives.

Conclusion:

The Special Committee on Electoral Reform has homework to do. They must pick and choose elements among systems, avoiding the pitfalls that some countries have experienced, to put together a system that works for our large and diverse country.

There is no perfect electoral system. Coming up with a new system is complicated, but using a new system need not be.

If you’d like to know more:

You can email Dave Stewart (davestewart51@gmail.com)

Prison Farms: A Government That Is Finally Listening

By: Rileigh Perin

The shut down of prison farms in Kingston was extremely controversial and remains a poignant issue in our community. In March of 2010 the Conservative Federal Government voted to shut down Canadian prison farms due to a lack of employment opportunity in the agriculture industry. The idea behind the closure was to modernize skill development in the Correctional Services of Canada (CSC) and ensure inmates would leave prison with marketable employment skills. According to a CSC report from 2004 to 2009, less than 1% of offenders found work in the agriculture industry. Liberal Minister of Parliament Mark Holland however astutely pointed out at the time “…many inmates who have gone through the farm program have indeed found work, just not necessarily in agriculture”. Clearly, focusing on the “1%” statistics is only part of the picture. Adding insult to injury, the financial reconstruction focused on building new prisons, hiring more guards and lacked any plan to fill the rehabilitation gap left by the shut down of prison farms. The decision sent a message to Canadian families dealing with incarceration that their loved one was not worth the cost of rehabilitating.

Prison farms have many benefits outside of employment including its unique rehabilitation effects. Advocate groups, notably Save Our Prison Farms, have been campaigning to re-open prison farms since their closure. Our Minister of Parliament Mark Gerresten brought up this issue in the House
of Parliament that prompted the Liberal Government to undertake a “feasibility study”.

So, are these programs worth reinstating?

Simply put, absolutely, prison farm programs work. Correctional officials that have seen the prison farms operate know that the programs were very successful in providing inmates with both life skills - responsibility, empathy and money management- and job skills - work ethic and discipline- for those who intend on reentering society. This program not only rewards an inmate with seeing the fruits of their labour but also earns them with credentials as a hard worker for future employer. From an economic standpoint, the farms encouraged the prisons to be self-sustaining and a contributor to our community by producing all of their own dairy products including eggs, cheese and milk. Moreover, the labour to produce these goods is nearly free (the best paying jobs earn the inmates $6.90 per day) and most of the land that the prison farms once occupied has not been reused for any other purpose. The only reason to oppose the reopening of the prison farms is that it costs the government too much, but no one has been able to come forth with an exact figure that can be comparable to the costs and burdens of recidivism in our nation, which I am inclined to believe outweighs all. Consultation from the general public has occurred online as well as in a Public Town Hall with both our current MP Mark Gerresten and the Minister of Public Safety Ralph Goodale present. The result of both of these inquiries will be put into a report that will hopefully translate into a government decision to re-establish the prison farms. Follow the conversation and keep up the momentum!

**KIFLA PRESIDENT UPDATE:**

The difference a few can make

By: Tom Addison

Back in March, the Liberal Party of Canada announced that it would be introducing a new Constitution at the Winnipeg Biennial. Although they announced that the proposed constitution would replace all Provincial, Territorial and Commission Constitutions currently in force, there was little information as to how it would impact EDA’s (Electoral District Associations, also called Ridings). The rumours I was hearing caused me concern. At our Annual General Meeting, the membership passed a motion calling for a Special General Meeting once the proposed constitution was released, at least two weeks prior to the Biennial.

When the proposed Constitution was released, I started writing to EDA Presidents across Canada asking them their concerns and views of the document. To my great surprise, very few had actually read the document. The few people who had read it expressed concerns about it and we started to correspond. In order to allow everyone who was interested to participate, I created a Google group called Liberal Members Matter (LMM). At the time of its creation we were a hardy band of 4. I sent emails to all the Presidents I could secure emails for, telling them about LMM and inviting them to participate in our discussions. At this point we were still trying to determine what the impact of the document would be on our EDA.

In early May our EDA held its Special General Meeting. By this time I had reached the conclusion that there were serious concerns about the proposed constitution and it’s potential impact on our membership and the future of our EDA. At the SGM the membership overwhelmingly shared my concerns and passed two motions by almost a unanimous vote to; firstly, oppose the proposed Constitution and secondly to send a notice to LPC President Anna Gainey, calling on the LPC to hold a secret ballot on the vote over the proposed constitution. These votes were both forwarded to LPC President Anna Gainey without reply.

As the date for Winnipeg drew closer LMM grew slowly and steadily. Even in the days leading up to the convention I was receiving phone calls and emails asking about the document and what my concerns were. In response our group created a web site, with a blog, a facebook page and a Twitter account. All the information we could garner was shared among the group. The most important thing to know was that not every member of LMM shared our view and the group’s primary aim was about sharing information not about demanding compliance. However, in the days leading up to Winnipeg, the party leadership began a “full court press” with trumped up survey’s, email blasts and almost daily phone calls. When our group asked for equal access so we could send out one email to all delegates, the party refused our request in spite of our access being guaranteed under the Constitution. This biased pressure being exerted on every delegate began to change the mood of many delegates, and suddenly the interest in our group seemed to grow (although very few were still willing to take the risk of challenging the party leadership).

A few weeks before Winnipeg, one of our members leaked our existence to the media of The Hill Times. Abbas Rana, Assistant Deputy Editor, called me asking if he could interview me for a story. After some discussion among the group, I agreed and began what proved to be a very busy few weeks as media across Canada followed up on the story.
LMM arrived in Winnipeg ready for a campaign. The Executive of Kingston and the Islands had approved my printing almost 1000 buttons of various messages including: NO, No Constitution without Consultation and “Liberal Members Matter” in various designs. The Executive had also approved the use of my hotel room as a Campaign Headquarters. Immediately upon my arrival I began to connect with members who I had scheduled to meet in advance of the meetings. Even before I was able to register, the first media reporter from CPAN, did the first of a number of interviews with me questioning my concerns and addressing the points raised by members who supported the proposed Constitution. Over the next few days, as well another story in the Hill Times, our concerns and opposition to the proposed Constitution was detailed in The National Post, The Ottawa Citizen, The Globe and Mail, La Presse, The Huffington Post, our story was further carried on CTV, CBC, Global, Radio Canada and an extended story on CPAN. Without question Kingston and the Islands became very well known for its opposition to the proposed Constitution and why.

Although our core group remained small, the delegates not only felt the pressure exerted upon them to “follow the party line” but found that any right to discuss or debate the issue was being taken away from them. This seemed to add to our numbers whether delegates supported our position or not, they seemed to feel that they should have the right to have a full and open discussion, and seemed to resent the Party’s “strong arm tactics”. On the Friday night there was an hour allowed for question and answer, LMM began the meeting with plans for specific questions to be asked from every microphone. While we couldn't know the impact in advance, once members saw the numbers of people opposed to the document and the vague answers available to us, large numbers of people felt secure in raising their own concerns and after the hour that the leadership had allowed for the Q&A as the panel left their seats, every microphone was filled with delegates wanting to pose their own questions. Later that night, the party was setting the rules for debate and votes the next day, an effort was put forward to try and call for a secret ballot, unfort...
demonstrating that young Canadians care about politics. Furthermore, last year, Justin Trudeau made a specific promise to young Canadians. He promised that as Prime Minister, not only would he listen to the ideas of young people but young Canadians would play a central role in addressing the issues affecting our generation. One of the many ways our Prime Minister has kept his promise to listen to youth through the means of Liberal Party policy process.

The Ontario Young Liberals Summer Fling 2016 took place the weekend of August 12-14, at Queen’s University here in great riding of Kingston and the Islands. This was the first time in several years that an Ontario Young Liberals event has taken place in Kingston. Young Liberals came from all corners of our province; Kingston had the amazing opportunity to show our Liberal spirit and commitment to the Liberal cause. The Queen’s University Young Liberals put together a packed weekend that became a great experience!

Summer Fling is the Ontario Young Liberals annual policy conference that helps shape the policies the Provincial and Federal Liberal’s Youth Wing chooses to promote and advocate. It is because of previous Summer Fling policy conferences that Ontario Young Liberals have pushed for initiatives ranging from LGBTQ2+ rights, to support of marijuana legalization, to more accessible education and beyond!

Prior to the conference clubs across the province participated in their Regional Policy Parliaments, where they were able to present, debate and prioritize the policies their region would bring to Summer Fling. With Liberal majorities in Parliament and at Queen’s Park, young people must be empowered like never before to affect meaningful change in our party and province. Events such as Summer Fling are essential to engaging young people in the political process and creating the opportunity for governments to hear the voices of young people.

During the conference, ten federal policies were debated, passing five, and prioritizing another two. Building on our historic campaign for the indigenous people of Canada, a policy to provide more opportunities for our aboriginal people was passed. The Ontario Young Liberals furthered their commitment to the LGBTQ2+ community by passing a policy to create gender-neutral washrooms to benefit people who identify with a wide variety of gender identities and expressions. As young people, the young liberals recognize that a vibrant young generation must support those who came before them. That is why at the Summer Fling a policy was passed to switch between the Canadian Pension Plan Retirement Pension and the Canadian Pension Plan Disability Benefits between ages 60-64.

The other two policies passed focused on building the Canada of the future. In our ever globalized world, having the ability to be connected through the Internet is becoming evermore important. This need has been heightened by the fact that communication channels are extremely well developed these days. For this reason, the Ontario Young Liberals passed a policy to close the digital divide in Canada, with a focus on having Internet connectivity as a necessity. The Ontario Young Liberals recognize that the earth on which they live is the one they will live on for many years to come. The previous government’s lack of commitment on the issue was of serious concern, but with the new Liberal government comes a new hope for renewal of Canada’s environmental integrity. This is why at Summer Fling a policy was passed to restore Canada’s environmental integrity by protecting it for years to come.

Of the policies passed, two were prioritized and will be brought forth to the party. The first prioritized policy looks to revolutionize the way in which we combat drugs in our society. The prioritized policy was focused on harm reduction through demands of decriminalization drug possession. The second included focused on the often-overlooked issue of domestic violence against men. The policy calls for the creation of shelters for male victims of domestic violence.

During the conference many guest speakers attended to address the future of the Liberal party. Some of these speakers included Mark Gerretsen, our member of Parliament for Kingston and the Islands. Further, The Honorable Patty Hajdu, Minister of Status of Women of Canada addressed the group of engaged young people.

The team of co-chairs ensured that Summer Fling 2016 was a weekend of excitement and engaging policy discussion. The amazing co-chairs Maddy Dinsdale and Troy Aharonian, are present and former Queen’s University Liberal Association Presidents. Their combination of experience, diverse perspectives, and local knowledge they brought to Summer Fling 2016 is sure to help to create many great discussions!