

PEI COALITION FOR WOMEN IN GOVERNMENT

*Submission to the Special Committee on Democratic Reform for
the House of Commons*

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The PEI Coalition for Women in Government thanks the Special Committee on Democratic Reform for the House of Commons for the opportunity to appear as a witnesses on electoral reform.

The PEI Coalition for Women in Government is a multi-partisan coalition of individuals and organizations which came together in 2003 to develop strategies to increase women's opportunities to be elected to all levels of government in PEI. Part of the initial strategy of the Coalition was to research election data and international best practices for electing women, as well as to conduct focus groups with PEI women. Based on our research, the Coalition came to a number of conclusions and recommendations which have been presented to political parties and governments.

It is important to note that the Coalition has a long history of participating in efforts related to advancing electoral reform, specifically proportional representation at the provincial level, including the 2005 plebiscite as well as the current plebiscite. Since June of 2016, we have followed the work of the Special Committee on Electoral Reform at the federal level and appreciate the opportunity to appear as a witness to share our work on electoral reform within the context of gender and diversity analysis.

The Special Committee on Electoral Reform (ERRE) mandate is "to identify and conduct a study of viable alternate voting systems to replace the first-past-the-post system, as well as to examine mandatory voting and online voting, and to assess the extent to which the options identified could advance the following principles for electoral reform, effectiveness and legitimacy; engagement; accessibility and inclusiveness; integrity; and local representation." However, our submission will focus specifically on the opportunity for greater accessibility and inclusiveness of women and under-represented groups within electoral systems.

While our submission focuses on the need to increase the number of women in government, we recognize that women's identities are intersectional. Women experience the world differently depending on their multiple identities, which include gender, but also Indigenous, Francophone, racialized, newcomer, LGBTQ, and youth identities, which are all under-represented in government. Despite the best efforts of elected officials to represent all people, women, men, and people of all genders have different experiences and perspectives that must be represented within a democracy.

The under-representation of women in government persists at all levels across the country, including here in PEI. Women make up more than half of the Canadian and Island population, but are under-represented at both levels of government. Despite more women than ever before being elected to the House of Commons in 2015, the percentage

of women MPs only rose 1%, bringing the total percentage of women MPs to 26%. Canada currently ranks 64th out of 190 national parliaments in terms of gender in elected office. Without any changes to the current system, it will take approximately 90 years to reach gender parity at the federal level. The numbers are even more concerning in Prince Edward Island, where the percentage of women in government peaked at 25.9% in 2007 and has steadily declined over the last two elections. Currently, women make up just 14.8% of Members of the Legislative Assembly, placing PEI among the lowest in the country in terms of gender in elected office.

Democracy is intended to be a form of government in which citizens elect officials to represent them to make political decisions, formulate laws, and administer programs for the public good. When half of the population is missing from the arena where decision-making takes place we do not have a democracy that is truly representative of the population it serves. In order to enhance and strengthen democracy we need to increase the number of women, diverse women and under-represented groups in government so government adequately represents our population. And the majority of Canadians agree: a 2008 poll by Equal Voice revealed that 85% of Canadians (men and women) supported efforts to increase the number of women elected in Canada.

International research indicates that increasing the number of women in government increases attention to issues such as violence, health care, childcare and corporate accountability. Having more women elected will bring more diversity of experience to government decision-making tables, increasing the potential for policy and programs that speak to women's experience and lives. In other countries as well as in Canada's and PEI's past increased diversity has led to decision making with a major impact on equality. For example, childcare and violence prevention programs, which have also had a positive economic impact on societies, have all expanded as the number of women in government has grown.

Another benefit of having more women in government is supported by research presented by Dr. Margaret-Ann Armour at A Bold Vision: Women's Leadership Conference in Brudenell, PEI, which demonstrated that when gender parity is achieved women and men tend to work more collaboratively, generate more creative ideas, draw from multiple perspectives and devise robust solutions to problems. Undoubtedly, our government and society would benefit from greater diversity in government.

It is true that women have run and been elected under the current electoral system, but our work over the past thirteen years has revealed that women face significant barriers and challenges to political leadership. Research by political scholars, Trimble and Arcsott reveals that women can only make a substantial difference to political discourse when they are present in more than token numbers. The UN has identified the critical mass needed for meaningful change as one-third (33.3%) women. History and examples show the number of women in government will not rise naturally on its own. A concerted and sustained effort is needed to increase the number of women elected and must include a

combination of approaches that focus on addressing not only the individual barriers but also the structural and systemic barriers, including the electoral system.

Early research by the PEI Coalition for Women in Government revealed that voters in PEI are not discriminating against women at the polls. Despite the fact that women statistically have won more against men than the other way around, analysis of the data indicates that voters care more about a candidate's party than they do about their gender. More than 89% of the time, candidates won or lost depending on their party's overall success. We maintain that the biggest barrier to electing women lies with getting women's names on the ballot in the first place.

Political parties are simply not nominating women at high enough numbers to make substantial change. There is also significant variation of women candidates between parties. Historically, the NDP and Green Party have nominated more women, however, that has not translated into electing more women within the current first-past-the-post electoral system. In 2013 Trimble, Arcsott and Tremblay compiled research on women's representation in Canadian governments, which indicates political parties across the country are not nominating enough women candidates.

While our work has focused on collaborating with individual women and political parties, it has always remained clear that the whole electoral system requires a major overhaul to ensure a truly representative democracy, in which elected representatives reflect the diversity of the population. Long before women were considered persons under the law or had the right to vote, first-past-the-post was utilized solely by men. It is not surprising then that this colonial system has failed to meet the needs of women and diverse candidates and voters.

The Coalition for Women in Government is pleased that the Special Committee on Electoral Reform is focused on alternatives to the current first-past-the-post electoral system for Canada. While we are not experts in specific models, we have drawn from our past research as well as national and international research to support our position that proportional representation is a best practice for electing women.

When we look at the democracies with the most balanced proportion of women, we find that most of these have some form of proportional representation. Almost all of the top ten countries outlined by the Inter-Parliamentary Union use some form of proportional representation. Proportional Representation is an electoral system where the percentage of seats that a party wins is equal to the percentage of popular vote that party receives. So if a party receives 40% of the popular vote, they receive 40% of the seats.

Proportional electoral systems contribute to the election of more women because there is more diversity among parties elected. Under some proportional systems, parties are responsible to develop a list, either open or closed of candidates. When developing a candidate list, parties are more likely to look at the list holistically for geographic, gender, and diversity balance. Women in Politics: Beyond the Numbers notes that a "contagion

effect” is more likely within proportional systems. Contagion is a process by which parties adopt policies initiated by other political parties. Proportional electoral systems are more likely to include smaller parties, with more diverse candidate lists, which inspire other parties to ensure their lists are also representative of the population. This would be true of PEI and Canada, where smaller parties have historically nominated more women candidates than larger parties.

According to research by world-renowned political scientist, Arend Lijphart (2012), proportional representation has a positive impact on the number of women elected to government. “In his landmark study – Patterns of Democracy – Lijphart compared 36 democracies over 29 years, and found that in countries using proportional systems elected women to parliament 8% more than majoritarian (FPTP) systems”.

Furthermore, Dr Joanna Everitt, Dean of Arts at the University of New Brunswick in Saint John and a Professor of Political Science specializing in women and politics, notes that “if Canada were to switch to a Proportional Representation voting system, then in the very next election our percentage of women MPs would jump by at least 10%.” In comparison, the recent federal election saw a small 1% increase in the percentage of women elected. A 10% jump in the number of women elected would bring Canada much closer to gender parity.

When we look at democracies around the world, we find that the more women there are in government, the more likely a jurisdiction appears to enact policy which supports women's everyday lives and reflects their lived experiences. When we look at the democracies with the most balanced proportion of women, we find that most of these have some form of proportional representation. Canada has a unique opportunity to develop a new proportional electoral system, designed with a gender and equity lens to best meet the needs of our increasingly diverse population.

In closing, we would like to thank you for this opportunity to provide input into your process. Yours is not an easy task but legislation, plans and policies which not only ensure the equal involvement of women but encourage it are essential if Canada is to ensure its future economic and social development.

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