

Gender, Diversity, and Electoral Reform

Submission to the Special Committee on the Democratic Renewal

PEI ADVISORY COUNCIL ON THE STATUS OF WOMEN

Introduction

Thank you very much for the opportunity this evening to present to this important consultation on democratic renewal for the province of Prince Edward Island. The Prince Edward Island Advisory Council on the Status of Women is a nine-member council appointed by government with a legislated mandate to advise government and educate the public on issues that affect the status of Island women. One issue that is important to the status of Island women is women in leadership, including political leadership.

The Advisory Council on the Status of Women has examined questions of women's leadership for many years and studied the local, national, and international research on factors that result in women being under-represented in Canadian governments. The Council developed and published a Policy Guide on Electoral Reform in 2005.¹ Supported by what we have learned, the Council has advocated in favour of Prince Edward Island moving towards an electoral system based on proportional representation.

The PEI Advisory Council on the Status of Women is also proud to be part of two Coalitions you have heard from already in these public hearings: the PEI Coalition for Women in Government and the newly formed Coalition for Proportional Representation. Our aim is to add to the excellent presentations these groups have already made. The PEI Advisory Council on the Status of Women supports the recommendations of these two coalitions.

Why are we in favour of proportional representation?

A key question the Advisory Council on the Status of Women hopes you will consider is this: when we make changes to the electoral system, what problems are we seeking to fix?

In our view, the problem that is most pressingly in need of a fix is the chronic under-representation of women in government. The majoritarian, winner-takes-all (first past-the-post) electoral system we have now was not designed to produce gender parity or to reduce barriers to women being elected. The electoral system we have now was designed before women were allowed to vote or were even considered "persons" under the law.

Out of hundreds of people elected to represent their neighbours in the history of the Legislative Assembly of Prince Edward Island, only twenty-six have been women. Ms.

¹ The PEIACSW Policy Guide on Women and Electoral Reform and related public education materials on electoral reform are available: <http://www.gov.pe.ca/acsw/index.php3?number=1015114&lang=E>

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Sherry and Minister Biggar, you are one of those mighty twenty-six women. We honour your history-making commitment to public service.²

In 2005, when the Advisory Council on the Status of Women first took a position in favour of proportional representation, research by the PEI Coalition for Women in Government showed that at that time, over 85% of countries in which women held 30% or more seats in parliament used some form of proportional representation to elect their governments.³

Earlier research, in the 1990s, by the European Parliament's Directorate-General for Research, showed that at that time, not only did *the vast majority of* countries with 30% or more women in their governments use some form of proportionality in their voting systems – but also that 90% of the countries in the world that had *no* women parliamentarians used majoritarian electoral systems, like the one we use.⁴

The electoral system is not the only factor in getting more women elected, but there is clearly a strong correlation between women's electoral success and the electoral system.

Gender diversity and other kinds of diversity at decision-making tables is an inherent good in a representational government, where MLAs are elected to *represent* a population. Women make up half the population but have rarely and barely made up more than a quarter of the legislature.⁵ What's worse, the numbers seem to have stalled, with little "natural" growth.⁶ A variety of factors affect the seeming plateau women have reached: continued inequality in incomes and continued imbalance in caregiving responsibilities are two, and these contribute to another, which is a gender difference in balancing responsibilities of paid work, unpaid work, and personal, family, and social time. Women and men and diverse groups continue to experience their day-

² Numbers courtesy of the PEI Coalition for Women in Government. See http://www.womeningovernmentpei.ca/content/page/resources_significantdates for a timeline of historical firsts for women in government in PEI.

³ PEI Coalition for Women in Government, *Getting Women Elected: Innovative Practices from Around the World*, available http://www.womeningovernmentpei.ca/content/page/resources_innovativepractices.

⁴ European Parliament Directorate-General for Research, *Differential Impact of Electoral Systems on Female Political Representation*, available http://www.europarl.europa.eu/workingpapers/femm/w10/2_en.htm

⁵ PEI Coalition for Women in Government, "Percentage of Women in PEI Legislature Down," available http://www.womeningovernmentpei.ca/content/page/front_news/id/95. Gender analysis of previous elections available http://www.womeningovernmentpei.ca/content/page/resources_research.

⁶ Without changes to current systems, Equal Voice Canada estimates it will take 89 years for women to reach parity in Canada! (See Nancy Peckford and Grace Lore, "When it comes to gender parity in Parliament, better is always possible," *Ottawa Citizen*, October 20, 2015, <http://ottawacitizen.com/news/politics/nancy-peckford-and-grace-lore-when-it-comes-to-gender-parity-in-parliament-better-is-always-possible>). Equal Voice Canada has facts and research on women in government across Canada. See their fact sheet here: <http://www.equalvoice.ca/facts.cfm>

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to-day lives and the world differently, and their different lives, experiences, and voices are needed at the table to shape good public policy.

Research by the Coalition for Women in Government has shown that voters do not discriminate against women at the polls. Female candidates succeed or fail in measure with the parties they are running for: more win when their parties win, more lose when their parties lose.⁷

When women do well or do poorly in proportion with the parties they represent, it seems reasonable to conclude that proportionality is a problem that needs to be fixed in our electoral system. Proportional representation is the best fix for this problem, since a proportional system balances voters' choices for representation with the distribution of parties' seats in the legislature.

For these reasons, in the coming months, when Islanders are consulted about democratic renewal for Prince Edward Island, we strongly recommend

- that the ballot question on any referendum on democratic renewal offer a clear choice between the current electoral system and a system of proportional representation.
- that any educational materials leading up to a plebiscite outline the pros and cons of each system – including potential effects on gender balance and diversity – in clear, simple, and neutral language.

What do we think about preferential balloting?

Preferential balloting is not an electoral system in itself. A preferential ballot is a tool that can be used in either a majoritarian (first-past-the-post) or a proportional electoral system. Our preference is clearly and strongly for a proportional system.

Again, it is important to ask: Is electing MLAs with a plurality of the votes rather than an absolute majority the problem we wish to fix?

We would answer that this problem is not a priority for the PEI Advisory Council on the Status of Women.

In the cursory review of international research we reviewed for this evening's presentation, the evidence seems to show that voters do not discriminate against

⁷ PEI Coalition for Women in Government, "It's About Time: Phase One Research," available <http://www.womeningovernmentpei.ca/sitefiles/File/research/phase1research.pdf>

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women or other under-represented groups when they rank candidates on a preferential ballot.⁸ This matter requires further examination, which leads us to recommend

- that a gender and diversity lens be applied to preferential balloting as a tool for either the first-past-the-post or a proportional representation electoral system.

Are there other ways to reduce barriers to more women being elected?

According to the PEI Coalition for Women in Government, the biggest challenge women face is in getting their names on the ballot. That means the biggest challenge is getting nominated. Reducing barriers to women being nominated is a problem worth exploring.

One factor in excluding women from nominations is the way political parties build their lists of candidates. Under our current system, each candidate for each party is selected individually. It can be hard to achieve gender parity or increased diversity.

If we were planning a menu for a dinner party, what factors might we consider? We'd probably want to make sure we didn't serve only appetizers or only desserts. We'd probably want to make sure there was some variety in the flavours on offer – maybe something vegetarian, for example.

The menu would probably end up with more variety than if we were hosting a potluck. At a potluck, at least at the potlucks I go to, it is not unusual to have too many appetizers or too many desserts. Sometimes everything is vegetarian – and sometimes nothing.

Developing a party list is more like planning a menu than hosting a potluck. When each riding association chooses its candidate, it is offering up its specialty to the potluck table. The party can offer some guidance – asking in general for more desserts this year – but there is often resistance to centralized control, and there will always be the potluck-party-goer who insists that “It will be fine if I make my famous appetizers! Everyone knows I always make appetizers, and everyone loves my appetizers. I'm sure someone else will make a salad.”

List systems, common in proportional electoral systems, tend to have more diversity on the menu.⁹ This is one reason women are better represented in parliaments with proportional systems. Presenting a list with all men or with only a few women or token

⁸ See, for example, research by Gil McElroy, “Candidate Gender and Voter Choice: Analysis from a Multimember Preferential Voting System” or Jonathan Kelley and Ian McAllister, “The Electoral Consequences of Gender in Australia.”

⁹ See, for example, analysis of list systems by Richard E. Matland and Donley T. Studlar, “The Contagion of Women Candidates in Single-Member District and Proportional Representation Electoral Systems: Canada and Norway.”

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diversity does not sit well with voters, and parties also respond to positive peer pressure and to competition, and this helps drive diversity on lists.¹⁰ It is hard to incorporate the benefits of party lists in our current winner-takes-all system.

Recent research by our sister Advisory Council in Quebec, Le Conseil statut de la femme, offers some suggestions for increasing women's representation. Their central recommendation is that government implement goals for gender parity, implementing the concept of a "parity zone" with parties recruiting a minimum of forty percent and a maximum of sixty percent of candidates from among women or men. They recommend financial penalties for parties that fail to meet this obligation. They further recommend that every registered political party be required to submit their record of their recruitment efforts after each general election and then be required to publish their action plan to increase the rate of women candidates.

There are other ways to encourage women's political participation and to reduce barriers to women being elected. Just two examples include reviewing and updating what expenses are reimbursed for political candidates – and including caregiving expenses; and reviewing the hours of the legislature (which are still based on the historical PEI passenger train schedule) to see if they meet the needs of today's MLAs and their families.

We congratulate you on including recommendations from the Coalition for Women in Government¹¹ on the democratic renewal website and hope that you will explore these recommendations in detail. Given that so much can and should be accomplished prior to changes in electoral systems, we recommend

- that the Province of Prince Edward Island continue to reduce barriers to electing more women through whatever means are feasible, including electoral reform, but also considering changes to electoral financing, implementing a "parity zone," or making changes that support work-life balance for MLAs.

Conclusion: The need for gender and diversity analysis

The electoral system we currently use has been built and shaped over time, with values and goals in mind – as we can see by the premium our current system puts on

¹⁰ Conseil du statut de la femme Québec, *Les femmes en politique : en route vers la parité 2015*, available https://www.csf.gouv.qc.ca/wp-content/uploads/avis_femmes_et_politique_web2.pdf. They have terrific infographics and information on parity in politics here: <https://www.csf.gouv.qc.ca/femmes-en-politique/>.

¹¹ These recommendations are from the 2009 PEI Coalition for Women in Government research report "Whose Job Is It Anyway?" available http://www.womeningovernmentpei.ca/content/page/resources_research. Many of the recommendations are listed on the democratic renewal website here: <http://www.assembly.pe.ca/democraticrenewal/index.php?number=1053988&lang=E>.

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geographic balance (ridings distributed across the province) and population balance (similar levels of population per riding). Our democracy is a dynamic and evolving collaboration among citizens and civil society and political groups and governments. It is time to expand the idea of “fairness” beyond geographical and population fairness. It is neither natural nor inevitable for women to be under-represented as elected officials. Women’s under-representation is a product of historical and ongoing decisions and processes. It is a problem we can acknowledge and fix. We are pleased to be part of the discussion of democratic renewal in Prince Edward Island and to advocate for changes that could better include women and diverse groups. For this reason, we conclude with a final recommendation

- that a gender and diversity lens be applied to the electoral renewal process moving forward.

RECOMMENDATIONS SUMMARY

The PEI Advisory Council on the Status of Women supports the recommendations of the PEI Coalition for Women in Government and the PEI Coalition for Proportional Representation. We are active members of these coalitions. We echo and amplify their recommendations with the following ones of our own.

Recommendations of the PEI Advisory Council on the Status of Women to the Special Committee on Democratic Renewal:

- That the ballot question on any referendum on democratic renewal offer a clear choice between the current electoral system and a system of proportional representation.
- That any educational materials leading up to a plebiscite outline the pros and cons of each system – including potential effects on gender balance and diversity – in clear, simple, and neutral language.
- That a gender and diversity lens be applied to preferential balloting as a tool for either the first-past-the-post or a proportional representation electoral system.
- That the Province of Prince Edward Island continue to reduce barriers to electing more women through whatever means are feasible, including electoral reform, but also considering changes to electoral financing, implementing a “parity zone,” or changes that support work-life balance for MLAs.
- That a gender and diversity lens be applied to the electoral renewal process moving forward.