

Women & the Plebiscite on Electoral Reform Count Us In! Prince Edward Island 2005



FINAL REPORT

Women and Electoral Reform
a workshop to explore the recently proposed Mixed member Proportional System and
its impact on women in PEI

September 28, 2005
Howard Johnson's Dutch Inn, Cornwall, Prince Edward Island
Kirstin Lund, Facilitator

AGENDA

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| 8:30 a.m. | Registration |
| 9:00 a.m. | Welcome and Review of Agenda |
| 9:10 a.m. | Presentation of the Proposed MMP System
<i>J'Nan Brown, Commissioner, Commission on PEI's Electoral Future</i> |
| 9:30 a.m. | Presentation of Research: The Potential Impact of the Proposed System for Women
<i>Jane Ledwell, PEI Advisory Council on the Status of Women</i> |
| 9:50 a.m. | Questions and Discussion |
| 10:15 a.m. | Break |
| 10:30 a.m. | Small Group Discussion
<i>What will this mean for our organization or for women in PEI? What are some ways we can work together to educate our memberships, PEI women, and the general public about the proposed system and its potential implications?</i> |
| 11:00 a.m. | Highlights of Small Group Discussion |
| 11:20 a.m. | Wrap-up |
| 11:30 a.m. | Press Conference to Release the Policy Guide on Women and Electoral Reform
<i>PEI Advisory Council on the Status of Women</i> |

BACKGROUND

This workshop on women and electoral reform was organized by the PEI Advisory Council on the Status of Women. The Advisory Council is a government-appointed Council made up of nine women. The Council works for equality and supports women's full and active participation in social, legal, cultural, economic, and political spheres of life. The Council set women and decision-making as a focus for research and policy analysis; their research and analysis over a period of more than twelve months showed that changing the electoral system would be a big step towards achieving more equality for women in decision-making. When the Commission on PEI's Electoral Future was formed, Council asked staff members to develop a plebiscite guide and other public education materials on the benefits of proportional representation for PEI women.

The PEI Coalition for Women in Government is the multi-partisan group that coordinates the project "It's About Time: An Initiative to Elect Women in PEI." Last December, as the culmination of the first phase of this project, the Coalition released research on the history and present condition of women in elected office on Prince Edward Island. They also made recommendations to government, including a recommendation that they legislate proportional representation. In the second phase of the project, the Coalition is supporting political parties to nominate nine women each in the next provincial election. In addition, the Coalition is planning a Campaign or Candidate School for Women. The Coalition is funded by the Women's Program, Status of Women Canada.

Facilitator Kirstin Lund is Chairperson of the Advisory Council on the Status of Women and, in her paid work as a consultant, is also coordinator of projects on behalf of the Coalition for Women in Government.

Presenter Jane Ledwell is researcher/policy analyst for the Advisory Council on the Status of Women and sits on the Coalition for Women in Government in that capacity.

Presenter J'Nan Brown was selected for the Commission on PEI's Electoral Future by the New Democratic Party. She is also a member of Fair Vote Canada.

"YES" COALITION

At the workshop questions arose about the "YES" coalition that was forming. The first meeting of this group took place the evening before the workshop, so organizers did not have a lot of answers. The Coalition is open to any member or group who would like to join to support work towards a "YES" vote on November 28. It was brought together by CUPE (Canadian Union of Public Employees). At the Coalition's first meeting, the group hired Mark Greenan of Summerside as co-ordinator. To join the Coalition or to get more information Mark can be reached at markgreenan@gmail.com. Committees have been struck to look at fundraising, canvassing, and communications. There is also a core coordinating group.

HIGHLIGHTS: QUESTIONS AND DISCUSSION FROM THE FLOOR

How will the MMP model impact negatively on democracy as some critics are saying?

- More votes will count
- Voter turnout is higher when people think their votes count

How will list candidates be held accountable?

- They will be held accountable when votes are cast for re-electing parties and re-apportioning seats in the Legislature
- The nomination of list candidates allows a chance for members of parties and the public to exert pressure to have their interests met (gender equality, diversity, rural representation)

Will lists be ranked?

- Yes, under the model as it is currently proposed, parties will rank lists.
- This underscores a problem: parties are not stating their plans for engaging their members and the public in decision-making about lists. Their silence leads to confusion about the role of lists.

Can someone run in a district and still be on the list?

- Under the proposed system, yes, someone can run in a district and on the list. This is referred to as “dual candidacy” and has been a subject of debate.

Is dual candidacy common to MMP systems?

- Yes, it is common in other jurisdictions. The issue boils down to changing attitudes about the role of government and the role of representatives in the house. Dual candidacy focuses on whether or not representatives are contributing to good government or not. J’Nan stressed that the new system involves a change of thinking about how our government will work with Islanders.

Do any other countries have standard practice for how parties make their lists? Do they have legislation about it?

- Yes. Other countries do use legislation to guide list creation. For example, many countries require a certain percentage of list seats be filled by women, to create better gender balance.

There seem to be two themes in some of the opposition to the proposed model: first, a knee-jerk fear of minority governments. Islanders need to hear more that a more diverse opposition forces people to get past confrontational and polarized politics. Aggressive, confrontational politics area barrier to women who “don't want anything to do with that nonsense,” but want thoughtful, respectful debate and cooperation.

- It is important to remember that the system that we have in which two parties traditionally take turns forming government is tied into a lot of powers that have a lot of power over people: people feel that in a patronage-based system, their jobs are at stake. This ties in to a whole system of economic development that is failing citizens and creating

fear and desperation — that again translates into fear that a new system will not meet basic needs.

Are there international examples of training programs for MLAs and potential MLAs to get them past the mindset they've been accustomed to?

— Germany is an example of how it has come together, with more emphasis on the performance of the particular candidates in the legislature. With potential minority governments there will be meetings and consensus. When people have to work together, “star candidates” become important. The best brokers and negotiators have greatest potential to become stars.

Past election results would not have resulted in minority government under MMP.

— Yes. This is true. But we also want to be clear in the message that voting habits do change and will change under a new electoral system, so looking to the past doesn't provide a full picture.

We should use historical data to remind people that you used to be able to vote twice, and now you'll be able to do it again!

— Yes! This a good message.

The bottleneck in discussion about the model seems to be closed lists versus open lists. Are women adversely affected when people can rank the candidates on an open list?

— Open versus closed lists seems to have mixed blessings for women candidates.

— The advantage of the closed list is that it gives each party the responsibility to show they are concerned about Island issues and to show, by their list, what they see as important.

— One option that has been researched by the Law Commission is the “flexible open list,” in which people can either vote for a party or vote for a name on a list. Very few people choose to vote for the name; most vote the party list.

What about party participation on the Island? Would Islanders be more likely to feel they had to be part of a party to influence change?

— Canada has very low participation rates in political parties, despite the number of people who say they would like to influence change. Citizens are choosing other avenues. This is partly a result of how parties are uncritically permitted to act as private entities on corporate models, rather than public institutions.

I'm concerned about the kind of campaign going on, if the media is any indication. There seems to be a lot of negative response to MMP. How can we mount a strong “yes” campaign in a systematic way?

— A “YES” coalition has just formed, just last night. We hope its messages will start to get out to the public soon.

Public sessions are not working because the cultural power culturally empowered people are poll chairs. Be aware that it is not the Liberals and Conservatives mounting a visible campaign: it's more covert, through the poll chairs. These people play a big role in community: they are intimidating, and they control jobs. My concern is, how do we mount a "yes" campaign that considers who we are talking to at the roots of community?

It is also important not to use language of "democracy" as if it means elections alone: people are cynical due to lack of voice between elections. They don't know true democracy.

There should be a fairly decent handful of women from each of the political parties interested in a "yes" vote. We could have a march, as women, to show ourselves in favour of this system. There has to be a strong show of women from each of the parties marching together. There are lots of people who don't pay attention to our system now, let alone what is proposed for change. We need a lot of change in the parties themselves. If they understand from women in their parties that this is a true opportunity of change, perhaps the parties will be moved to more support.

October 6th is the Commission on PEI's Electoral Future's last public meeting. There may be changes to the model in the two weeks following that and before the big wrap-up meeting in Charlottetown on the 18th. The final model will then be presented.

Is there any way to get the leadership of the parties to come clean on what they see as a legitimate process for nominating lists?

— So far, the parties are saying they are not taking an official stand on PR.

Would it be useful for Green and NDP Parties to lay out their plans publicly?

— Yes.

BREAK

During the break, a number of points were raised with organizers:

— There's a need to get women signed up for the "YES" campaign.

— Women should be encouraged to post questions and comments on the Commission Website, www.electoralfuture.pe.ca

— There was a concern about dialogue in the room at the workshop presuming the absence of Conservative and Liberal parties; we should presume women who support all parties were present.

After the break, J'Nan clarified several points:

— A review of the reformed electoral system has been recommended to coincide with electoral boundaries review.

— The nomination of list candidates will be clear in advance — lists will have to be publicly

posted when the election is called.

HIGHLIGHTS FROM SMALL-GROUP DISCUSSIONS

Group 1:

- Communicate this message: If this proposal is not passed, it will be a major setback for women on PEI, since the progress to getting the Legislature to look like our population is really slow. It will also be a setback for Canada if it is not passed.
- Host “big bang” public event after the close of Commission meetings (between October 6th and 18th), preferably on a Thursday evening. At the event, ensure each one of the parties has as many women (and men) as possible that believe in the “yes” vote. The ideal would be to have close to equal numbers from all parties and close to equal gender balance. Ideas included entertainment by Cynthia Dunsford and letting go a hundred balloons of each party's colour
- Follow up the event with a news conference the next day, featuring prominent women of each party (Marion Reid, Libbe Hubley, e.g.).
- Have women join the “Yes” coalition, to be part of that.
- Write letters to the editor in favour of electoral reform: at least four women, one from each of the provincial political parties, as guest editorials.

Group 2:

- If representing organizations, involve organizations in whatever way we can.
- Form a coalition, with a visible group heading it up, not a hodgepodge. It could be called “Count women in,” “yes” campaign, or similar name.
- Meet and do something like what we've done today to move into a strategy.
- Build on the foundation of a campaign here, since we assume all parties have people here at the workshop. Have a strategy meeting to develop a clear, week-by-week strategy.
- Present research.
- Emphasize that electoral reform doesn't just touch on “women's issues”; women take care of much of education and health, which aren't considered “women's issues.” Every issue we present is a *people's issue*.
- Create a visible network, with women from all parties. Develop a concrete media strategy around these women.
- If there's an event, have advocates not identify themselves from their political parties, but rather from their interest as Islanders, as citizens who care about this. (Don't want parties to have their “blast” in the middle of it.)

Group 3:

- The idea of women's march has been mentioned.
- It will be important to canvas as we might during an election campaign: one-on-one basis, direct and personal content, answer their concerns.

- How broadly can the ACSW's pamphlet be distributed? (Kirstin responded that participants could copy as much as you want — no copyright on any of the material).
- Acadian community are trying to get information out through community networks (alternative channels with CBC lock-out); Acadians stand to gain district and list voices.
- Get prominent political voices to speak publicly in some form on this "yes" vote.
- Identify and get to poll captains in the districts, understanding they will toe party line.
- Encourage leaders of parties to speak out.
- Get the message to youth, who are sadly cynical. (Irene Novaczek announced there was to be a student forum at UPEI and that there would be some strongly negative voices part of the discussion.)
- The Institute of Island Studies is willing to assist with facilitation, as an umbrella to help develop an event where more public discussion will occur.
- CUPE is another umbrella.
- Strategies are need to get information into rural areas, Women's Institutes, agricultural organizations, fisheries organizations.
- Seniors' magazines have wide distribution and should be considered as a media outlet.
- In-person is so important, speak face-to-face whenever possible.
- Other radio stations, newspapers to get out guest editorials and letters to the editor.
- Anti-poverty march on October 17: without compromising focus, perhaps collaborate with them to get MMP message out, bring to public attention.

Group 4:

- Ensuring there's training for MLAs on how to perform within the new system, offer them support and reduce confusion.
- Encourage individuals from across PEI to phone or write to political offices to ask how parties will choose their lists, to show public interest in issue and ask for answers.
- Joint statement/event, with members of all-parties in favour of reform. (Julie Devon Dodd and Kirstin Lund would be willing to facilitate a collaborative process towards a joint statement.)
- Post questions to electoral futures Website: www.electoralfuture.pe.ca
- Targets and timelines for increasing women's participation in politics.
- Invite women to join "YES" coalition.
- Use plain language whenever possible when communicating "YES" message.

Group 5:

- Joint statement to be published with names of women who cross pol. spectrum, recognizable names. Appear in an ad. Submissions on behalf of organizations supporting that statement.
- October 17th Make Poverty History event also raised as focal point to bring to light.

- In terms of lists and composition of lists: Could the Commission be challenged to propose that list formulation be legislated.
- October 18 is Persons Day — maybe need to pull something together, a breakfast or other event.
- October 17th will also celebrate culmination of World March of Women, in addition to day for elimination of Poverty.

THREADS FROM SMALL-GROUP DISCUSSIONS

Kirstin commented that a “YES” campaign was launched last night at a meeting called by CUPE (Canadian Union of Public Employees). Kirstin pointed to a sign-up sheet at the back for anyone interested in joining this coalition. The Campaign struck committees to act on 1) communications, 2) fundraising, and 3) a ground campaign (canvassing), in addition to core messages.

In terms of ideas coming from groups, Kirstin noted some consensus around finding a way to do something as women that involves all parties, bringing together prominent or visible women representing each of the four parties. Coordination of this kind of event is still a question!

The PEI Coalition for Women in Government is now connected to "YES" campaign. The suggestion that there be a coordinated women's campaign could provide an opportunity to come back together to talk about events or bringing all-party women together. The Coalition for Women in Government could coordinate bringing that meeting together.

Kirstin asked participants to provide their mailing address if we don't have your e-mail. Organizers committed to sending out notes from the meeting.

Where do we go from here? Discussion from the floor.

Did we discuss today the ACSW recommending to government that lists would have to be 50% women?

— Since the ACSW’s policy guide has to respond to either a scenario with MMP or without MMP (depending on results of the plebiscite), it is not as specific as that. However, it makes clear recommendations for electoral reform to eliminate barriers to women’s participation.

Can the ACSW one-pager be sent as a general mailout to every household?

— This is a budget issue. The workshop coordinators do not have a budget to do this, but perhaps the “YES” campaign could include the one-pager in their mailout. Blair Weeks offered to send the ACSW their costing for a cross-Island mailout. (His estimate was about \$4,000.)

— Parts of the information developed by the ACSW will make it into the “YES” campaign. Jane will work with the “YES” campaign communications committee.

There is a sense that with just two months to the plebiscite, time is of the essence. It seems important to show support for the model at meetings before the 6th, after which changes will be considered.

Is there a desire to come together again around this issue?

— A separate “YES” campaign focussed on women might not be possible.

Is the "YES coalition willing to take into consideration representing the point of view of counting women in?

— Kirstin and Jane will share the ideas and will assess what's within our resources to carry forward from Coalition for Women in Government and the Advisory Council on the Status of Women.