Professor Paul G. Thomas, “Ten Quick Thoughts on Electoral Reform in Ten Minutes”
Notes for a presentation to the Special Committee on Electoral Reform, September 20, 2016

Thank you for the opportunity to present my perspective on this important topic.

I have submitted a commentary on the topic of mandatory voting which I believe has been translated and circulated.

I have also prepared 30 pages plus paper on the criteria for the design of an electoral system and the advantages/disadvantages of the status quo and four options for alternative electoral systems.

I would be happy to answer questions on both those topics.

For today’s opening remarks I want to make ten quick points in ten minutes:

1. There is no perfect electoral system. Different countries have relatively strong, healthy democracies under a variety of electoral systems. By international standards and comparisons Canada has a relatively healthy democracy. The design and choice of an electoral system must reflect the history, traditions and changing social, economic and political realities of a particular country. Borrowing from elsewhere must be done cautiously because it is difficult to predict how different models will work in the Canadian context.

2. There are two main questions involved with electoral reform: what problem(s) are we seeking to address and what principles/values are we seeking to see reflected in a new electoral system. On both these points reasonable people can disagree, both as to what principles/values should guide reform and as to the real world consequences of particular changes.

3. Electoral reform is often presented as a response to the public frustration and disillusionment with politics, politicians and governments. There is a malaise - NOT A CRISIS OF DEMOCRACY - within the Canadian political system, but the FPTP electoral system is not the principal cause of what is a multi-dimensional problem. Adoption of a new electoral system would contribute only marginally to a reduction in public discontent.

4. A related issue raised by the current reform debate is whether it is realistic in a large, complicated, pluralistic, dynamic country to expect omnibus, national political parties to capture and give meaningful political expression to the diverse values, interests, demands and needs that exist in Canada. Has the era of national brokerage political parties passed? Does the future entail a proliferation of parties that structure their appeals to voters on a narrower, less inclusive basis? Should electoral reform support a trend towards more specialized parties? Some models of PR would definitely lead to more political fragmentation in the form of greater number of splinter or fringe parties.

5. Composing a list of principles and values that should guide the design of an electoral system is relatively easy. However, such a list is always general and vague. Finding agreement on what the principles/values mean in practice is
one of the difficult steps in the reform process. Moreover such design criteria will to some extent clash, so it is not possible to maximize the achievement of each of them. Instead trade offs must be made, but this can only be done subjectively and impressionistically.

6. A constructive debate over electoral reform must avoid reduction into simplistic, false dichotomies that encourage proponents of different models to talk past one another. For example, the choice is often presented as a stark majoritarian model versus some form of proportional representation. In fact, there are hybrid models that seek to find the “sweet spot” where some of the advantages-and fewer of the disadvantages-of each type of model are realized.

7. National party representation versus individual, local representation is another such dichotomy. My research on regional ministers, party caucuses and the Senate tells me that there is more regional representation happening within the political system that is popularly imagined. The problem is that such representation happens behind closed doors so it is not generally recognized as taking place. In my view, preserving the “personal” factor in any electoral system is crucial. By the personal factor I mean the maintenance - even enhancement - of the role of the local MP in being responsive to and representing her/his constituency. Service to the community is the main motivation that causes people to stand initially for public office. Serving constituents is often the most satisfying part of the job for MPs. Even if the majority of Canadians would be hard pressed to name their local MP, they are nonetheless strongly attached to the idea of a representative who is elected by and answers to their community.

8. The word “legitimacy” comes up frequently in electoral reform debates. This is a contentious notion. It involves both a substantive and a procedural aspect. Put simply, legitimacy requires decisions that are based on widely held values and that are made through appropriate and widely accepted procedures. In other words, legitimacy is not just about levels of approval in a poll, election or a referendum. A decision based on sound evidence and careful analysis can have legitimacy, even if it fails a popularity test in the short term.

9. From the standpoint of legitimacy, electoral reform poses a dilemma. Political parties represented in Parliament are being asked to select the rules of the game in which they are players. In an era of widespread public cynicism, there will inevitably be perceptions that each of the parties will make self-interested calculations to choose their preferred electoral system. It is conceivable that parties could genuinely believe a particular model will be to their political advantage but also believe that it will best serve the current and future needs of the country. In terms of public support and legitimacy, it would definitely help if agreement on a particular electoral system could be achieved between two or more political parties represented on this committee.
10. Mobilizing informed public consent and support for electoral reform will be difficult. Most Canadians take the electoral system for granted. They are reasonably clear on what values/principles they wish to see reflected in the electoral system, but they lack information on the technical matters related to the design of the system. In communicating about the electoral system it is important for reasons of credibility, and to avoid future disappointment, not to exaggerate either the problems of the current system or the benefits of an alternative model.

In summary a decision on a new electoral system involves consideration of multiple values, a series of potential purposes and a significant measure of uncertainty about how a particular model will work in practice.

There is no way that even the smartest and best-informed Canadians - including the members of this committee - can hold all the relevant considerations in their mind and make a comprehensive decision.

In terms of practical reasoning, I would recommend the selection of three or four values and aims that you consider the most important. Then a matrix might be constructed that ranked two or three options for new models against this limited number of criteria of design and selection.

I am skeptical about the urgency of electoral reform and the capacity of any system to deliver the multiple benefits that various sincere proponents claim for them. If there must be a replacement for FPTP, in my opinion the choice is between the Alternative Vote model and the MMP based on regions.

Electoral reform could wait until after the 2019 election. A committee report and a concrete government proposal could be part of the next election campaign. Meanwhile there is much else to be done on a democratic reform agenda.