Should we change the way we vote in Canada? This is the principal question occupying this committee. The committee appears to have accepted that reform is inevitable. This is apparent in the unwillingness of most parties to consider a referendum on any proposed systems, as such referendums are difficult to win. It is apparent too in the testimony before the committee. While it has been refreshingly broad, evidence-based, and informative, there has been little in defense of the status quo.

Today, I intend to make four observations. The overall objective of these observations is to induce some pause among members of the committee and their colleagues. I hope that you would reflect on and give equal weight to the known benefits (and drawbacks) of our current system as you do the known and unknown benefits and drawbacks of other systems.

My observations are the following:

1. There is a potential “upside” to electoral reform, but it seems limited.
2. The “downsides” to electoral reform are unknown and potentially substantial.
3. Canadian democracy already functions well.
4. For most of the problems ailing our democracy, there are potential fixes at hand which do not require fundamental institutional change.

Taken together, these observations suggest that the committee should not engage in wholesale reform of our electoral system.
Instead, I argue, it should consider and recommend smaller, targeted reforms which might address the problems which currently beset our political system.

**The first observation is that there is a potential upside to electoral reform, but it is limited.**

The best evidence we have for this are many well-constructed cross-national studies that seek to isolate and identify the effects of electoral systems on various outcomes of interest. The basic conclusion – following testimony already given by André Blais – is that in PR systems turnout is higher, though by not much more than 3 percentage points. Citizens also feel elections have been more fairly conducted in PR systems. On the other hand, PR systems do not eliminate the need or rate of strategic voting. They simply ask voters to make other compromises. Most importantly, while PR systems may broaden representation, they do not improve the match of policy outcomes and citizens’ preferences.

What Blais did not note, Leslie Seidle and others have in their presentations: electoral reform would likely increase gender balance in our Parliament. This is an unalloyed good.

My own reading of the literature is that claims about greater economic performance, fiscal management, and better policy are probably attributable to other factors.

Of course, advocates of PR electoral systems might argue that such studies somehow underestimate the salutary effects of PR. I think it is a reasonable objection that cross-national, econometric estimates do not tell the whole story. A reasonable alternative approach is to look at another country which is most similar to our own and which has experienced a change in electoral systems. By observing the pre-reform and post-reform averages on several
outcomes of interest, we can say something about how electoral reform might change the politics of a country.

New Zealand provides such a case, and for obvious reasons. It shares a common colonial heritage with Canada. It has a long history of uninterrupted democratic rule, with power alternating between a small number of single parties who regularly commanded majority governments. In 1996, after a series of referendums, New Zealand moved to an MMP system. Seven elections have been held under this system.

I would point interested readers to my written submission for a detailed discussion. The topline results are the following: electoral reform increased the number of effective parties in New Zealand. It also marginally increased the average number of parties in government, though single party governments now appear to be the norm. It did not increase voter turnout or even arrest its decline. It did not increase citizens’ expressions of democratic satisfaction. Rather, these appear to have declined. The number of women elected in the last election is just 5 percentage points greater than in Canada.

For the things that matter, there is more difference between countries that share an electoral system then there is in the average across electoral systems. In short, PR systems make some things better, but they are hardly a cure all.

The second observation is that there is some downside to reform.

Or, at a minimum, there are some likely effects which could be normatively undesirable. First, reform will create a potentially permanent role for small, regional parties. Second, small parties will potentially have outsized influence in governments. If it is objectionable that a single party can hold 100% of government
power with 40% of the vote, why is it ok that a party with 10% of the vote might hold 20% of government power? Third, there will be increased incentives for political entrepreneurs to exploit social divisions. Some comparative data are helpful on this matter. If we compare the 15 Western countries with the greatest foreign born populations, we will find that the average vote share for parties in favour of reducing legal immigration is 3.5% in majoritarian countries. In PR countries, it is 8.7%. The average seat share of such parties is 0.1% in majoritarian countries. It is 10% in PR countries. Finally, a proportional system will invite greater government instability, in which governments survive for shorter periods of time and in which new governments are more regularly introduced without an election. Whether this is normatively desirable is an open question. The empirical regularity is not.

My third observation is that Canadian democracy functions well.

My own reading of testimony to and questioning by the special committee has suggested to me that the functioning of Canadian democracy has not been sufficiently appreciated. Certainly, there is much with which we can take some issue. Our country has experienced one party dominance rivalled only by Sweden and Japan. We have, as in most other countries in the world, experienced significant decline in our rates of voter participation, though this saw a large correction in the last election. Perhaps most importantly, we do frequently experience parties winning outsized majorities on much less than a majority of the ballots cast. None of these are particularly good things. They are certainly well-rehearsed as critiques.

What is noted much less frequently are at least four measures on which our democracy has performed well. First, our democracy has experienced more than 40 federal elections and dozens of peaceful transitions of power, both between leaders from different
parties and within federal parties. This is a basic standard of democracy, and it is one that sets Canada apart from most other democracies. Indeed, Canada’s run of uninterrupted democratic rule is among the longest in the world, surpassed by less than a handful of other countries.

Second, by the standards of their times, our elections have been freely and fairly conducted and our franchise has been liberally composed. Save the Canadian Pacific scandal and relatively pedestrian turnout buying in early elections, Canada’s democracy has been a model of well-run elections.

Third, our democracy performs well in the political representation of minorities and indigenous peoples, especially compared to our Anglo-American counterparts. More historically, our political parties have a long track record of representing the broad diversity of our country – whether linguistic, confessional, or ethnic – without the emergence of explicitly ethnic or confessional parties. I wish to note especially that this has happened against the backdrop of founding groups and later waves of immigrants who at various times viewed each other as unfit for common purpose and interaction. Put starkly, our country has long held the potential to be a tinderbox of identity. For the most part, we’ve avoided all but the smallest of fires.

On this, much is made of the point that we are not “Italy or Israel”. But this cannot mean that we are not a country that is characterized by competing regional economies, often deep religious and ethnic differences, and different ways of life. I assume that those who make this argument must mean that despite having the makings of a deeply divided and dysfunctional polity, we are not one. Our electoral system just might have something to do with that.

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1 I refer readers to the testimony of Leslie Seidle on this point.
Fourth, our country has a long record of protecting the rights of minority groups. In more recent years, this has largely been the work of the Charter. But before its advent, it is still the case that protections were extended, often because of an electoral logic. At other times, they were extended because of the goal of broad coalition building that are the norm within our political parties.

My fourth observation is that for most of the problems ailing our democracy, there are potential fixes at hand which do not require fundamental institutional change.

I wish finally to encourage the committee to take at once a broad and modest approach to reforming our democratic institutions. There are, to be sure, shortcomings in our current democratic system. Turnout is lower than we might like. We have not yet approached an even balance of female to male Members of Parliament. Party leaders seem perhaps too strong vis-à-vis Members of Parliament. Local party members do not enjoy real control over the selection of candidates. Parliamentary committees are sometimes weak and have neither the time nor the capacity to properly study and deliberate over policy.

This list is hardly exhaustive; yet there are potential solutions at hand for all of these problems which do not require a fundamental change to a central institution. Instead, the Committee and the Members’ parties can explore a number of changes to parliamentary procedure, administrative law, and party rules that could address some or all of these problems.

It seems more judicious to engage in a systematic and iterative process of improving our democratic institutions – as is now occurring in the appointment of Supreme Court justices, for example – then it does to engage in wholesale reform.
Our electoral system is a central democratic institution. It exists in concert with a myriad of other institutions. It informs our politics not only through its rules, but through the norms and practices which have evolved alongside and within it. We should carefully consider not only the upside and drawbacks of reform, but also the merits of our current system. On balance, it is a system worth keeping.