

Ted Talks May Summary

A facetious look at whether we can reduce the number of members of parliament

The NWB Probus TED TALK Group met via coded Zoom on May 11, 2021. The Moderator of the session (Al MacDonald) had received a **TOP SECRET** letter from the Prime Minister's Office (PMO) 2 weeks prior. In that letter the Prime Minister advised that our group had been selected, sole source, to prepare a report on how the PMO could drastically reduce the number of Members of Parliament before the next Federal election. The PMO asked that the report be submitted by coded message no later than May 12, 2021 as he planned to call a snap election that day or soon thereafter. The PMO also said that our group was welcome to make similar suggestions for the Senate of Canada, for which additional compensation would be arranged.

The following day, we received a comprehensive package of historical information on the number of MP's and Senators since Confederation. The package included graphs, charts, spread sheets and related documents.

The data showed that the number of MPs had grown from 180 in 1867 as additional provinces joined Confederation, such that there were 262 MPs after Newfoundland joined Confederation in 1949. There are now 338 MPs. Similarly, the number of Senators had grown from 72 to 102 during that same period. There are now 105 Senators. At the same time, the population in Canada had grown from about 3 million at Confederation to about 37 million in 2017.

At our meeting on May 11th, we focussed first on the appropriate number of MP's. Each participant gave their views about reducing the number of MPs as requested by the PMO.

The first speaker represented himself as Sir John A. Macdonald (returned from the dead)! Sir John A. informed us that at the time of Confederation, he was elected as one of 180 MP's who represented a population of about 3 million. Hence, there was one MP for every 17,000 citizens (as opposed to the current 338 MP's representing a population of close to 38,000,000, translating to one MP for every 112,000 citizens). Sir John A. pointed out that in his day voting was limited primarily to property-owning males of European descent, so each MP represented even fewer citizens (than the purely mathematical model of dividing total population by the number of MPs suggests). If such a mathematical model would be applied to today's population, we would have 5000 MPs in the House! Hence, adoption of a qualitative approach to determine the size of the House of Commons would be more pragmatic. As a final guidance, the ghost of Sir John A. suggested that, like most complex issues of our day, the solution most often can be found at the pub.

Other speakers offered various positions as summarized below.

Taking Sir John A's advice, a qualitative approach allows us to weigh ourselves against other parliamentary systems such as the U.K., France, and Netherlands to compare representative ratios and costs. Interestingly, these countries have approximately the same ratio of MP's-to citizens and similar administrative costs.

Alternatively, we also considered a multi-tier system (based upon population), where Tier 1 would be Ontario and Quebec, Tier 2 would be Alberta and BC, Tier 3 would be Manitoba and Saskatchewan, etc. However, to precisely elucidate the details of the "tier-system" would take more time than we had, if we were to meet our May 12th due date.

We asked ourselves, what factual evidence is there to support a reduction in the number of MPs? Could we recommend MP reduction based upon the following two significant changes since confederation?

1. Technology, which now makes it easy and inexpensive for MP's to communicate with constituents and with Ottawa. Fewer MPs now can accomplish more than when travel and communication networks were unreliable, expensive, and time consuming.
2. Urbanization, which enhances interactive, face-to-face communication even further.

Finally, we asked if there are other reasons for high cost and low performance in the House of Commons. For example, one member noted mounting acrimony between political parties, resulting in less collaboration. This certainly decreases efficiency, competency, and trustworthiness, yet increases costs. Recommendations to reduce cost and improve outcomes should, therefore, scrutinize the issues of polarization and obstruction (rather than reducing the ratio of representation). Similar disruptive trends have been observed in other countries, most conspicuously the USA.

In conclusion, our group was split on whether to maintain the current MP quota or reduce the number. As a result, we could not satisfy the request from the PMO office with respect to reducing the number of MP's.

However, we did agree that we could reduce the number of Senators to about half of what we have now, recognizing the reduced number of Senators would need more researchers on staff to help the Senators "sort the wheat from the chaff".

Moreover, we concluded the Senators should not be appointed by the PMO (Prime Minister) at his/her discretion when a vacancy occurs. In addition, the Senate appointments should be isolated from party politics by:

- Explicitly defining the role of Senators
- Transparently defining desirable characteristics of a Senator (respected in the community, good communication skills, etc)
- Selecting Senators and "Senators in Waiting" through a provincial or other non-partisan process.

While we were not able to provide a definitive allocation formula for the reduced number of Senators, with a minor extension on time in our contract we could complete that task within a few days. Hence, we will wait to see if the PMO wishes us to proceed accordingly.

You'll find us at the pub.



Sir John A.



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