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News Release

Thursday November 15, 2018

No BC Proportional Representation Society calls for extension of voting period in BC electoral systems referendum, citing low turnout of 7.4% and ongoing postal dispute

VANCOUVER – The voting period in the BC electoral systems referendum should be extended because of low turnout of just 7.4% as of Wednesday and the ongoing postal dispute, says the official opponent group – the No BC Proportional Representation Society.

Society President Bill Tieleman says that Elections BC should set a later deadline than the current November 30 cut off for voters to get their ballots in – because without a mandatory participation threshold, just over half of 20% of voters or less could change our democratic electoral system from First Past The Post to Proportional Representation.

“We are voting on a fundamental aspect of our democracy – the system by which we choose our elected representatives and our government – that should not be changed by a tiny fraction of voters in a close result,” says Tieleman. “The last two referenda on electoral systems in 2005 and 2009 and the Harmonized Sales Tax referendum in 2011 all had turnouts above 50% - but we are nowhere near that with just two weeks left to go.”

"It was a mistake to lower the two voting thresholds used in the last two referendums," said Tieleman. "However to gain advantage for the government they changed it to a threshold to pass of 50% + 1. Surely a turnout of at least 50% + 1 of the eligible voters actually casting ballots must also be accepted before such significant change can be introduced."

Tieleman, a former NDP strategist, says Elections BC has the right to extend the deadline on its own authority and should do so immediately.

“We’ve had rotating Canada Post workers strikes and an abysmal turnout to date. Perhaps it’s time for Elections BC to exercise its authority and ensure a reasonable return rate in this referendum,” Tieleman said.

Society Vice-President Suzanne Anton, a former BC Liberal Attorney General, says a low turnout would bring any result narrowly calling for a dramatic change to a proportional representation electoral system into serious doubt.

“No one questioned the results of the previous two electoral system referenda or the HST vote because they had over half of all voters participating,” Anton says. “But if this referendum has a turnout of in the 20% range or even less, it will not be any kind of mandate for change, and raise questions as to the legitimacy of the whole process.”

Society Treasurer Bob Plecas, a retired former deputy minister under both BC NDP and BC Liberal governments, says Elections BC has done an admirable job in attempting to get people to vote but unfortunately the public has been perplexed by the referendum and ballot.

“When we say proportional representation is complicated and confusing, it's because that's what voters have constantly told us,” Plecas said. “I have drafted hundreds of cabinet submissions, and when you do you, must ensure cabinet has both adequate information and informed choices. Attorney General David Eby has failed in his duty to do that, and that has led to mass confusion and voter apathy. BC is in danger of facing the tyranny of the minority because of that failure.”

“That's why we are telling people to just vote ‘one and done’ – vote yes to keep our current first past the post system that has served BC well and forget about the second question on proportional representation models – you don't have to pick any of them and your vote is still totally valid,” Plecas says.

Tieleman said the Society is not recommending to Elections BC that a specific voter participation rate be met but pointed out that the last three provincial referenda all had over 50% turnout.

Background on recent referenda:

Electoral systems referendum in 2005 – turnout **61.4%**

Electoral systems referendum in 2009 – turnout **55.1%**

Harmonized Sales Tax referendum in 2011 – turnout **54.7%**

Metro Vancouver transit funding plebiscite in 2015 turnout **48.6%**

The 2005 and 2009 referenda were held concurrently with the provincial election vote; the HST and transit referenda were conducted by mail ballot.

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