



TESTIMONY TO NEW BRUNSWICK ELECTORAL REFORM COMMISSION*
OPENING REMARKS

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**Check against delivery*

Good morning and thank you for the opportunity to present to the Commission and speak on behalf of the more than 12,000 postsecondary students that this Alliance represents.

Let me first preface my opening remarks today by saying that the New Brunswick Student Alliance is not speaking today as a “youth” organization necessarily. We are a student-driven organization and while the majority of our members may fall in the “youth” category, the scope of the insight that I will be able to offer today will be limited to the student experience and how that pertains to this Commission’s work.

Understanding that I am limited in what we can necessarily speak on, I thought that I would make my remarks brief to allow more time for questions.

The concern that I think this Commission, and perhaps the public engaging in the issue, needs to very concertedly interrogate what it is they are hoping to achieve as an outcome of this process. There is a fantastic interview in Maclean’s from this week with Professor Philippe Lagassé of Carleton University on this very subject. Without wanting to parrot him, it is important for us to recognize what the consequences of our decisions may mean in terms of democracy.

I’ll come back to this idea later, but let me run through quickly how certain decisions affect students:

Age

This in particular has to do with outreach and registration. If you want to fix the root cause of the problem, then we should do so. Trying to find problems to which we cannot even articulate does not get us very far. As such, in addressing this question, we have to consider the following:

- Active registration of 18 year-olds;
- Engaging 17 year-olds who will be old enough come the elections;
- Politicising our campuses, both high school and postsecondary;
- Recognizing university residence and mailbox addresses as legitimate addresses for voting/registration purposes;



- Universal polling stations that take into consideration physical accessibility and proximity.

In other words, make it easy for students to register.

Naturally, there are two factors that impact a student's ability to register to vote — and this is on top of the active efforts by election officials between election cycles and the efforts in conjunction with student unions once the writs are issued: **residency and fixed election dates.**

They are linked because one determines the other. **We would recommend moving the provincial and municipal elections** to, as the last report recommended, at least the 3rd week of October. This would allow us to have a conversation on overhauling how we define residency and what that means. If we see students as transient or temporary residents in this province, how does that affect how we develop policy that disproportionately or uniquely affects them? How does this affect how we as a polity view public transportation, or education, or graduate employability?

I want to touch briefly on online voting because it amuses me and also because it involves postsecondary education. There seems to be a general sense of discomfort with the idea (of online voting) because of safety concerns. In essence, is the integrity of our democracy and our democratic institutions at risk?

While a valid question, it is also worth remember that our own Premier has stated that New Brunswick is "already a world leader in cybersecurity", so much so that we just opened a multimillion dollar national institute with a mandate to develop "security measures necessary to protect modern critical infrastructure in Canada." What can be more critical an infrastructure to our democracy than our electoral framework? We keep talking about the value of postsecondary education and research institutions... **test these capabilities.**

I want to come back to permanent resident voting, not necessarily because the NBSA has a position on it but because it necessitates a mental shift in how we define what it means to be a New Brunswicker. This is what I meant by determining outcomes and the unintended consequences of our actions and choices.

I see some positives to opening voting up to permanent residents: this would change the definition of being a New Brunswicker by placing greater value on *citizenry* rather than *citizenship*. This could allow the government to demonstrate a very serious attitude to the demographic and immigration challenges before us. It may also spur much-needed action on the civic education front with the hope that the equally-needed funding that requires comes too. Again, we see a role here for the education sectors.



However, we must also consider that this move could expose our society to conversations for which we simple are not ready. We have seen an increase in the boldness of xenophobic behaviour in the last three months. Just this past week, two New Brunswick communities — one of which includes 2,000 of our members — are dealing with an openly brazen affirmation that neo-Nazism is alive in this province.

Hope and hard work alone will not increase the political representation of marginalized people, undoubtedly many of whom do not believe their government is listening let alone getting things done for them. So, if this aspect of the Commission's work is about the engagement of marginalized peoples, we do have questions to pose:

- Have we adequately legitimized other forms of political participation?
- Do we understand what it means to marginalized people when their protests to have their civic rights, even here in New Brunswick, are met with a response that says, "All Lives Matter"?
- Are we prepared to debate notions like guaranteed seats for Indigenous representation in the Legislative Assembly? In our sector, we are trying to respond to the Truth & Reconciliation Commission's Calls to Action by moving to indigenise the Academy; have we considered the indigenisation of the Assembly?
- What happens if, after all this, we still end up with an Assembly constituted of 49 predominantly male, middle-aged, White members?

If the voices around the table aren't also young, for example, or of colour, or from women, what does that say about that type of diversity with which we are satisfied? What does that say about the marginalization of certain groups of people that is imposed and legitimized by our political systems?

On that note, I think it would be appropriate for me to end there and leave it to you for further questions. I would be happy to answer any of them.