

## None Of The Above

Address to the Citizen's assembly of Ontario

<http://www.citizensassembly.gov.on.ca/en-CA/home%20page.aspx>

I could talk to you about how important this forum is. Why can we say that the electoral system is broken, why is it that voter turnout is on a constant decline, why is it so important to do something about it. You know it already, proven by the very existence of this forum, therefore this is not what I want to talk to you about.

I could also talk to you about why this forum does not matter. Why is it unlikely that your recommendations will change anything; and why it is that even if it does, it will make no difference in our lives because what really matters is not how we elect our politicians but what we allow them to do, what we let them to get away with. I could tell why I agree with Benjamin Franklin's view of democracy, but that is not what I want to talk to you about either.

I could also simply answer your questions; talk to you about what I think about the options, the different systems of representation and my numerous ideas about improving it, but that is still not what I would want to talk to you about.

What I would like to submit for your consideration is a simple change, a simple addition to any of the systems you end up recommending. A simple addition that would not alter the practice but would represent a fundamental change in our attitude toward the process.

To better understand the point I am trying to make I will have to tell you a little about my background and I will have to relate to you a personal experience at a recent election.

My background is in sociology. In my twenties I was working as a research organizer. Part of my job was to design questionnaires, draw up coding instructions and tabulate the results.

Doing that, I learned the importance of asking good questions. I learned that stupid questions beget dumb answers, that unchecked assumption can make the replies useless. I learned – in short – the importance of controls.

I learned that questions without controls will produce unreliable or meaningless answers. If I ask you whether you prefer an izmo over a gizmo, the first assumption the question carries is that you know what I am talking about. The second is that you do have a preference; the third is that you are willing to share that information with me.

Unless I give my respondents the options – I don't know – I don't care – I refuse to answer – I cannot claim that I got truthful answers to my question; I cannot make a **legitimate** claim about the results of my survey.

A few years back in an election not so far away (it was federal) I noticed a stern warning on my voter's registration card. It warned me that spoiling my ballot is a criminal offence punishable by a \$5,000.- fine and/or up to one year in jail. Scary stuff, but it made me think: isn't the voting supposed to be anonymous? How would anybody know? How

could they catch me if I marked all or none? Nobody is supposed to look at it and once it is in the box, it is mixed with the rest. Either we have a very bad law or the claim of anonymity is a sham. If I could make a second recommendation it would be to remove that stupidity from the registration card, but never mind this aside for now.

I am a good citizen, or at least I am trying to be. I think that voting is important, I think that I cannot complain unless I made my voice heard. The problem at that particular election was that I REALLY did not know what that voice should say; I did not even know what kind of compromise to make.

I went to the elections official and pointed out that I have no option on the ballot that I can choose with a good conscience. "You have to make a choice" he said. "I cannot" – I said – I want to say 'none of the above.' "Then do not mark anything" he said. "But that would be spoiling my ballot – I said – and that is against the law."

He became irritated, grabbed the ballot out of my hand and stuffed it into the box. "It is done, now move on" he said while another one stepped closer to me rather aggressively - probably to prevent me from disturbing the peace in this shrine to the exercise of democracy.

This elections official spoiled my ballot. He committed a crime, worse yet, he committed a crime in my name, making – in a way – a criminal out of me.

When we calculate the results of an election, first we discard the views of those who did not go to vote even though it could be argued that refraining from voting is definitely an expression of their opinion. Then we discard the ballots that did not conform to the rules – which is what most likely happened to mine.

I don't know about you, but I do not like to be dismissed, I do not like my votes discarded. I want to be counted, I want to be heard.

That is why I am here, that is why I am talking to you. I wish to ask for your help to make certain that our true opinions will never be discarded again.

What I wish to recommend is to include - regardless of the system of representation chosen - a "**none of the above**" option on every ballot.

The problem with the system 'as it is' is that we cannot consider it legitimate.

How can we? How can anybody claim to get a legitimate answer to an illegitimate question? A question not providing acceptable options?

How can we consider a choice legitimate if the options are severely limited?

If I asked every citizen in this country whether I should cut off your left arm or the right one without giving them a third option and discarding the votes of those who refuse to make the choice – would you consider the result legitimate? How about if we make it more 'democratic' by offering four choices to include all four of your limbs? Would that make it more legitimate?

To what extent would it be different if the question was whether I should empty your left pocket or the right one? Or whether I should limit your rights to make moral choices or economic ones?

On a ballot giving me a choice between a thief, a robber, a rapist and an axe murderer, I would probably pick the thief, because that one at least will not hurt me. This is called

tactical voting. My choice would be rational – I chose the least evil – but wouldn't it be a little far-fetched to call it legitimate? Yet we do exactly this at every election.

Some people I know say that we should not even vote because voting legitimizes the powers oppressing us. The system is run by bureaucrats anyway and we only have elections to put a stamp of approval time to time on their right to exist as such. With the present system of strictly limited choices the point is hard to argue. A 100% list PR would improve the situation slightly by giving a better chance to smaller parties, but I am sure that it would still leave some people feel disenfranchised.

The system does not suppress dissent, it just disregards it. We may dislike the options given to us at an election; we just cannot express our dislike in a formal, legitimate manner. The way the system is, elections only serve to legitimize power. The existence of this forum and the ever decreasing voter turnout at elections prove that I am not alone with my feelings.

I am old enough to know that I am oppressed when I am and I am wise enough to know that there is precious little that I can do about it. I am not trying to rebel, I am not trying to make a revolution. All I am asking for is the right to say – in a way that is counted – in a way that matters - that **I DO NOT LIKE IT!!!!**

Contrary to the way it may sound, I would like to hope that my recommendation is not just about me, about my rights and dislikes, but it is a change that could have many positive and far reaching consequences.

- It could definitely increase voter turnout. People, who feel that they do not get the kind of representation they need, will have a way to express that feeling. Fewer people would consider the system irrelevant; the prestige of the whole electoral process would increase.
- Elected officials would have a very tangible measure of their mandate. A NOTA vote is an explicit vote against them, not simply a vote for another option and not something that can be dismissed as a mistake or a lack of interest. We can hope that this will humble them a little.
- I wouldn't suggest that there will be no more tactical votes, but I hope that there would be less as a result of this change. Voting would be more principled.
- Ridings with high level of NOTA votes will get a lot of attention from all parties; politicians will pay more attention to what people really want.

This small change alone can make politics a lot more interesting.

Including a None Of The Above option on the ballots has no drawbacks and does have several possible benefits.

Now the only question is this: can we, can you, can this assembly make this small change happen?

