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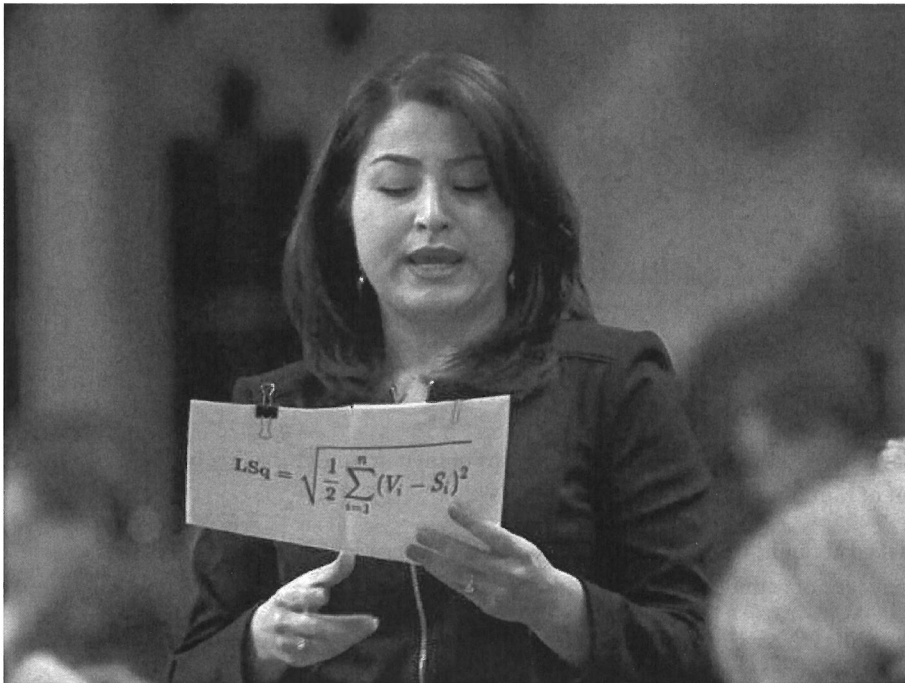
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Liberals called it ‘incomprehensible,’ but professor flattered his formula was used in electoral reform debate



MARIE-DANIELLE SMITH | December 5, 2016 5:46 PM ET
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Maryam Monsef Minister of Democratic Institutions stands in the House of Commons during question period on Parliament Hill, in Ottawa, Thursday, Dec. 1, 2016 Fred Chartrand / Canadian Press

OTTAWA — The professor who created the Gallagher Index is flattered his equation was read out in the House of Commons last week, but says Liberals were “unkind” with their treatment of his committee testimony.

Democratic Institutions Minister Maryam Monsef called the index an “incomprehensible formula” as she criticized a special committee on electoral reform Thursday.

After accusing them of not meeting their mandate with a hefty report, the minister apologized to committee members for her behaviour the next day. Though it featured heavily in her accusations, the Gallagher Index didn’t make it into the apology.

“As I understand it, in fairness to the minister, she was not actually criticizing the merits of the index ... as a means of measuring disproportionality, or suggesting that any other index would be a better measure,” Michael Gallagher, head of political science at Trinity College in Dublin, told the National Post in an email.

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“Rather, I think she was accusing the committee’s report of giving excessive weight to the criterion of proportionality at the expense of other factors.” Whether Monsef’s is a fair accusation or not, Gallagher said, he’ll leave to others to judge.

The index is a way of measuring election outcomes based on how proportional the vote share is to the seat counts parties end up with. Lower scores mean an election outcome is more proportional. In its report, supported by all the opposition parties but not by government MPs, the committee recommended the government choose a proportional representation system that produces scores

below a particular threshold.

In a supplementary report disagreeing with the main recommendations, Liberal MPs on the special committee said, “we believe most Canadians would not want their future electoral system decided solely on the basis of a complex mathematical equation. ... This would be difficult to explain and is a radical change that we think would be unacceptable to Canadians.”

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The Liberals were “a little unkind,” Gallagher says, when they used his testimony as part of their argument, saying he “failed to discuss his own index” when he testified in front of the committee.

“I didn’t discuss it, but that’s because I wasn’t asked about it! Nor was it relevant to any of the questions I was asked,” Gallagher said. “So my not having mentioned it doesn’t imply any lack of confidence in its soundness or usefulness.”

Still, Gallagher said it’s “unusual” and “quite flattering” to have his formula read out by a government minister in a parliamentary debate.

“It would have been even better if she had flourished a copy of the book that I co-edited (The Politics of Electoral Systems),” he added. “I think its sales in Canada may be falling off a bit.”

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