

Electoral Reform:
From "First Past the Post" to a More Representative Model of Governance

For almost a decade leading up to the last federal election, the Conservative Governments of Stephen Harper slowly but deliberately sought to simultaneously anesthetize and diminish our democracy. Harper's "party of one" aimed and acted to extinguish progressive thought and emasculate liberties of the body politic with a view to centralizing as much power as he could under the arbitrary whims of his P. M. O. Little wonder, then, that we Maritimers contributed with alacrity to his "culture of defeat" at the polls in October 2015. Progressives felt like an Iron Curtain of cynicism and mendacity had at last been torn down.

The fundamental challenge and choice that now lies before us is what will we build up in its place? As the foundation of each Canadian political party rests on a unique set of values, principles and platforms it is crucial in a pluralistic society that we seek "buy in" and participation by all citizens. The logical, most-defensible and fundamentally democratic electoral mechanism to achieve this goal is proportional representation.

Some will say that our current "first-pass-the-post" paradigm must not be supplanted by any "risky" electoral innovation. They are wrong. Premier Notley and, subsequently, Prime Minister Trudeau pioneered gender balance in their cabinet appointments in 2015. This has become the new benchmark for Canadian politics. However, voter participation has been in steady decline while public cynicism with politicians has risen sharply during the past several decades. We need a new method of electing our Parliament to win back the confidence of the public and convince them that government really is "responsible" and that "every vote counts."

Proportional Representation is the most basic cure for this malingering discontent. Why? PR will produce a far more equitable seat distribution in the House of Commons that mirrors the public will. This, in turn, will eradicate "false majorities" wherein a single party with only a plurality of the popular vote gets to wield power as if it were "the only kid on the block!" Under a PR system it will be highly likely that future elections would produce minority governments.

Minority governments used to be dismissed as weak and unproductive; come to think of it, Stephen Harper used to parrot this claim! If you want a government that can comfortably rule by cabinet fiat and arbitrary preference, one that can shackle opposition and muzzle dissent; he was right. But we don't; so he was wrong! From 1972 to 74 the minority government of Pierre Elliott Trudeau, supported by New Democrats lead by David Lewis, ushered in some of the most progressive legislation in our modern history.

Once the voters have expressed their verdict in a national election, the spectrum of that decision is initially manifested in a PR system by negotiations between parties that lead to the construction of a government. Thus, immediately, there is dialogue, not dictum, in public life. The need for two or more parties to work together for at least an agreed upon period of time to hold the confidence of the House in order to carry on government establishes a degree of civility and co-operation that is a far superior model and motivation for those in public life. Contrast this with the often blindly partisan and adversarial tone that characterized our recent "first-past-the-post" Tory-led Parliaments. Based upon their methodology, which of these two models, FPTP or PR, do you think is most likely to persevere patiently

to reach a reasonable compromise that most, if not all, sides in a debate can accept as fair?

I believe that Canadians would best be served by either an "open list" proportional system or a Mixed Member Proportional one. The former is perhaps the most democratic in that not only does a party receive the number of seats in the House in proportion to its percentage of the popular vote but voters can direct their choice to a specific individual from amongst those on their party's list of candidates. The Mixed Member Proportional system offers traditionalists a bit more comfort with winning constituency candidates whose numbers are complemented or "topped up" corresponding to each party's national popular vote.

Either of these systems would encourage greater voter turnout and encourage a broader participation in public affairs by those who have, in the past, been persuaded either that "my vote won't count" or "my gender/ethnic group/racial group, etc. will not have a critical mass of votes to make my going to the polls worthwhile." Needless to say, those who feel marginalized about voting will hardly feel inclined to consider standing as a candidate, assisting in canvassing and campaigning, let alone joining a political party.

In summary, I endorse Proportional Representation "open list" as my first choice or Mixed Member PR as a second choice as we move out of the era of Canada's colonial parliamentary system and into 2016. This change promises to be the greatest step forward since the secret ballot was mandated in 1874 and/or women were given the right to vote during World War One. We must act to help restore the relevancy of our democracy for the majority of our citizens who currently see it as a sham, theatre of charlatans and den of demagoguery!

Finally, I specifically DO NOT support the Prime Minister's preference of Transferable Vote. His preferred adjustment will only further engrain the possibility that one party could rule as if it had a majority of votes in the preceding election. Our democracy was almost eviscerated by the last prime minister; we don't need to put temptation in the hands of our current one. Mr. Brison, I ask you to put aside your partisan and privileged position as a cabinet minister in the present government and to work both in public and behind the scenes amongst your colleagues to do the best thing for all Canadians. Bring our electoral system into the 21st century and let our servants --- the politicians whom we elected in 2015 --- introduce legislation to implement the practice of proportional representation. Let's finally have a genuine, fulsome democracy in Canada rather than "democracy lite."

Respectfully submitted,

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