

On Democratic Reform

To the Committee Members,

I am writing in regards to what I think is the most important federal issue in my lifetime, that of electoral reform. Believe me, I am not one to normally write letters either to an MP or a newspaper. I just quietly go and vote then mutters to me at the results. But this is too important to leave to the media, the pundits and the talk show hosts. Please hear me out.

We are fortunate in Canada to have a multi-party system. Over the decades, many progressive policies have been introduced to the discourse by third parties and adopted by governing parties. Multiple viewpoints can be brought into the discussion. Contrast this with the American two-party system, where the policies slowly merge together to capture the in-between vote, and fierce arguments rage over the smallest differences. The American advantage is, of course, that vote splitting rarely subverts the will of the majority (except possibly Gore/Nader, Florida in 2000). In Canada, vote splitting has adversely affected all political parties.

Of course, the current dilemma is among the “progressive” parties. I have voted in every election since I turned 18 in 1976. I was often told that my vote was somehow a “wasted” vote, in that I was voting for a third or lower ranked party. I kept to my stubborn idealism and in return I have never seen a candidate that I voted for actually win in my riding. I have refused to even look at other party’s platforms knowing that they will in all probably lose and a candidate I strongly disagree will then be elected under FPTP. At least under the vote subsidy program a party that I voted for would get a toonie, but even this is no longer the case.

But I do want to appeal to the Conservative Party at this point. It was not that long ago that the conservative voters of Canada had a splendid choice between PC, Reform and then Alliance. I think conservative voters will remember those times as the Chretien Years. I am quite certain conservatives may have liked elements of each party’s stance, but by splitting their votes were horrified at the results. While Harper and Mackay were successful at re-uniting the party I believe that it is only under the stifling of caucus dissent that unity was maintained. I may be proven wrong in the next leadership convention, but a new schism could develop in the future. Or, a new party could nibble at their support. All conservatives do not think alike. We have seen the results of the American Republican dogma that, to even be considered as a proper Republican you must be a fiscal libertarian, a social conservative, pro-gun and hawkish on the military. I think we now see the results of grassroots supporters imploding under the imposed constraints. I do, as someone once said, have friends and neighbours who are conservative, and their varied viewpoints need to be heard as well.

And so what are the alternatives? I prefer a ranked ballot, myself. A single vote I cast is so often misconstrued by the pundits as a complete endorsement of one party’s platform, campaign and leadership, and a complete rejection of another. I would prefer the nuance of showing support to multiple parties that brought forward many good ideas. And in the end, one of the parties I like could well win my riding.

However even as I give this a “10” on my scale of preferences, other systems such as proportional or mixed would score about 9.9. The current FPTP I would give a zero for democratic systems. I do know that the Broadbent Institute believes that a ranked ballot would hurt the NDP. I personally do not believe this, so at this point I wish to appeal to them. I think in this letter I have shown my political cards already, so be it. In the last election I realised I had to vote strategically. I managed to find a combination of strategic voting websites and personal self-delusion to convince myself that I could vote with my heart. I was wrong. Under FPTP I will not make this mistake again. But if I am offered only a single vote under a proportional representation system, I will carefully examine the platforms of all progressive parties that are capable of making the popular threshold and carefully consider where my single vote will fall. With a ranked ballot I would be able to support all progressive parties, grading them on the issues that mean the most to me and without fretting about “strategy”.

My appeal to the Liberals is that I did show up as a “friend of the party” regardless of my final voting decision. I fully supported Joyce Murray’s campaign for her platform of proportional representation. I then fully supported Marc Garneau’s campaign for his platform of ranked balloting. I finally supported Justin Trudeau as party leader to implement electoral reform.

But it is not enough to come up with a reform package if it is doomed to fail. Your roadblocks are the Senate and the Supreme Court. Frankly, I do not care if you come up with the best system ever if it dies in a referendum and I am faced with FPTP again next election. Not only are Canadians reluctant when faced with change, but the increasingly annoying Toronto Star pundits are suggesting everything from super majorities to the 7/50 rule. So, under what conditions would the Senate and Supreme Court most likely allow a simple act of legislation?

First, while the Liberals have a mandate for the change, it is absolutely imperative that all three progressive parties agree upon it. All have clearly included electoral reform of some type in their platforms and together they easily represent a majority of voters. This means after the required posturing and committee work they come out united. If perchance the Conservatives see fit to back it, so much the better. But if lack of support from parties representing a majority of voters forces a referendum that fails, I will remember this next election.

And second, which system is least likely to be a significant or otherwise problematic change that could by some viewpoints be seen as needing a referendum? For this I will look at the arguments presented in the Star and other media, valid or not.

The spectre of perpetual minorities hijacked by fringe parties is most often raised for proportional and often for mixed systems. I recognise that this is NOT the case in many nations. But with a ranked ballot this is a non-issue. Sure, I could put down the Rhinoceros party as my first choice but eventually a more mainstream party would be shifted from my ballot. It would be shocking if 50% of the voters in my riding ranked them near the top.

An issue with proportional and often mixed systems is that people chosen from a list based on party votes do not “represent” a riding. This may be a valid point forcing a referendum, although it could be argued that current MPs represent their party more than their riding, reciting well vetted talking points and sending out the occasional loaded survey. However, with ranked ballots, this is a non-issue.

An issue with mixed, sometimes proportional and occasionally for ranked ballots (recent Toronto City Hall vote) is that they are too confusing for our poor Canadian brains. Australians certainly have no problem with ranked ballots. Nor do Canadian political party conventions, nor do many American cities. Look, if you can’t pick a second favourite, just do what you always did and put a mark in one circle. Make sure the legislation allows a vote with any mark in one circle to be counted as your single choice. We could always simplify it with actual runoff elections but they would cost a fortune and take weeks.

The only issue directed at ranked ballots is that a majority of voters could see their second favourite elected. I do not see a problem here. I think that this is preferable to a majority seeing their least favourite elected. And rarely do a majority see their favourite elected. Look, if I liked the Pirate Party and did not see a candidate for them on my ballot, then I would be voting for my second choice already. So if my first candidate gets dropped due to lack of votes, I am quite happy to see my second choice in the running.

Finally, as a teenager I often volunteered at the polls. I do know how hard they work and I understand that counting ranked ballots would be long hours of hard work. If it could be computerised, then so much the better. But to me it represents the best chance of progressive electoral reform that will pass the hurdles and give a better choice to Canadians of all political stripes.

Thank You,

Brian Fell
Niagara Falls ON