

Electoral Reform

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A Made-in Canada Solution!

Voting system reform holds promise for a renewed, more robust Canadian democracy. What system would deliver on the promise? From all possible systems the Preferential Ballot, aka Alternative Vote, is the least complicated and easiest to implement, but is it the best? The Preferential Ballot ensures each MP is elected by a majority of votes, giving MPs greater legitimacy at home, but not in Ottawa. It also fosters greater civility during the election, but not beyond. And therein lies its weakness. The benefits do not reach into Parliament. The makeup of Parliament remains unchanged. It is a winner-take-all system producing one-party majority governments secured on forty percent of the vote as readily as first-past-the-post. It is commonly assumed that electing each MP by a majority of votes means governments are similarly elected by a majority of the votes. Not so! For a party to gain majority government it must win a majority of the seats. In the extreme, if a party wins each of its seats on a bare majority it can win majority government on just twenty-six percent of the vote. The Preferential Ballot does not yield proportional results, the promised civility never reaches Ottawa, the alleged benefits stop on Election Day.

But there is more. The Preferential Ballot does not change the distribution of power within Parliament. Power remains concentrated in the Prime Minister and cabinet; private MPs remain weak and opposition parties without a constructive role. *The greatest defect of Canadian governance is excessive party discipline.* The democratic ideals envisaged by the parliamentary committee's *Guiding Principles*, such as effective local representation, broadly dispersed decision-making to foster inclusion, participation and consensus-building necessary to commit citizens to the common good are blocked by MPs beholden to their parties. For example, the most important role of an MP is to vote on legislative proposals and the budget with its expenditures and revenue measures. For those important votes Canadian MPs take direction from party more than from constituents. When your MP has no voice, you have no voice. For taxpayers to think as citizens, MPs need to speak for us, to represent us in Ottawa, not Ottawa to us. Political disconnect results when citizens lack political efficacy. Excessive party discipline thwarts the *Guiding Principles*.

The Preferential Ballot will not lessen party discipline one whit. That is equally true for all proportional representation systems, including the NDP's preferred Mixed Member Proportional. Those systems are all about parties and party control. Canada needs to empower its citizens not strengthen its political parties. The *Guiding Principles* are about citizens, not parties.

Is it possible to attain proportional results without proportional representation? Yes! Multi-seat Preferential, aka Single Transferable Vote, is not proportional representation, votes are for candidates not parties, yet it yields near-proportional results. Most votes

count, the House of Commons would mirror the political diversity of Canadians, its built-in primary means voters participate in a candidate's nomination, making MPs more beholden to voters than to parties, giving MPs a measure of independence necessary to hold government (PM and cabinet) accountable, lessening the concentration of power in the PMO and empowering MPs to be law-makers. Because it addresses a broad range of governance problems the 2005, BC Citizens Assembly after meeting for a year recommended multi-seat Preferential. In the subsequent referendum multi-seat Preferential enjoyed fifty-eight percent support overall and majority support in all but two constituencies. Yet it failed because political interests had decreed the referendum would require sixty percent support.

Can we expect consensus among Canadians to implement multi-seat Preferential? Probably not! Some will question the wisdom of committing Canada to coalition governments and rural voters will resist districts three times larger than the current ridings. The Preferential Ballot is not enough change, multi-seat Preferential is too much change. Happily, compromise is possible – *the Preferential Ballot using current ridings in rural areas and multi-seat Preferential in urban centres*. Such a mixed system suits Canada's unique representational challenge, namely few people, unevenly spread over vast geography. Preferential Ballot with a mixture of seats per district was used in both Manitoba and Alberta from the early 1920s to mid-1950s and for the 1951 and 1952 BC elections. Its discontinuance was at the hands of politicians. The voters had no say.

The Preferential Ballot with a mixture of seats per district addresses Canada's democratic deficit, votes and seats earned by each party are more balanced, it meets the *Guiding Principles* and it is politically doable. Smaller parties will do a bit better in the cities while rural Canada remains unchanged. Concern about instability is allayed because majority governments are not precluded. Fear that the Preferential Ballot gives an advantage to the Liberal party is not supported by history. Australia has used the Preferential Ballot since 1901 with no evidence Conservatives are disadvantaged. Similarly, the Canadian experience confirms there is no Liberal advantage.

A referendum is appropriate, but it should be a confirmation referendum after a test-run of two elections. That will give Canadian voters a clear, unambiguous understanding of what the referendum is about. New Zealand did it, so should Canada. The Trudeau Liberals made a promise, they were elected on that promise, a committee has been struck, let the conversation begin!

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