

**Brief to the Special Committee on Electoral Reform  
by Doug Bailie**

**Introduction**

This brief suggests the current voting system provides only weak accountability at either the local or national level and exaggerates regional divisions, therefore a system of proportional representation would best meet the five principles for electoral reform as stated in the committee's mandate.

**The Current System Versus Proportional Representation**

First-past-the-post largely fails as a system of local representation because of its exclusive use of single-member districts. When MPs vote on the major issues of concern to their constituents, they only have one vote, of course. The constituents may be divided on the issues, and sometimes MPs know the vote they cast is not the way most of their constituents would want them to vote. But at the next election, how can voters who disagree with their MP's voting record hold their MP to account? In many cases, the MP did not need their support in the last election and may not need it in the next one either.

Whether MPs are effectively representing the views of a majority or a minority of their constituents, on most major issues, a significant opinion group within the district does not have a local MP representing their views.

Now imagine a multiple-member district where the MPs are elected by proportional representation. It could be a three-member district with two MPs from Party A and one from Party B. In the next election, Party A knows it is not going to win all three seats, but they want to hold on to the two they have. Party B wants to take one of those seats away from Party A, while other parties are also evaluating the possibility of taking a seat away from either A or B.

Instead of a plurality of voters determining one representative for the whole riding, multiple opinion groups are included in selecting several MPs. It is not perfect, but it would be a more inclusive and accountable system of representation.

How would that change the House of Commons? Instead of representatives elected by 338 local pluralities, the House would provide a more accurate representation of the range of opinions in local areas across the country, and as a result more accurately reflect opinion across the whole country. A government responsible to such a House would be more accountable, more inclusive, and more democratic.

(Although I've illustrated my point with reference to a simple multiple-member district system, the same point could be made with reference to a Mixed Member Proportional system.)

First-past-the-post's tendency to reward parties with regional concentrations of support has been a detriment to Canadian unity. While we need a system that accurately reflects regional differences in political support, why do we tolerate a system that in election after election exaggerates them?

I write this as an Albertan who came of age in the 1970s. One of my earliest notions of politics (I was about 10 years old) came at the end of a federal election when it seemed to me that everyone voted for the PCs, but the Liberals won anyway. At the time, I was perplexed. Later, I learned how the system works and that Albertans, then as now, vote for candidates of various parties, including the Liberals. But it didn't change the fact that all the news about the federal government involved ministers that came from other provinces. I know there were some Alberta senators in the cabinet, but that wasn't enough to change the very strong sense that the federal government was something that came from some place else.

The voting system fed into the divisive regional issues of the time. Although the issues and the parties have changed significantly, it continues to damage our sense of Canada as a national community.

### **District Sizes**

As a way of ensuring districts in remote rural areas do not become unreasonably large, Jean-Pierre Kingsley suggested to the committee that it consider a hybrid system where somewhere between 40 to 60 districts would continue to use first-past-the-post in single-member districts while most of the rest of the country is divided into districts of 4 or 5 seats using proportional representation with open lists.

I recognize that Canadian geography requires those of us who support proportional representation to put a little water in our wine. Maintaining some single-member districts with plurality voting may be desirable, but I would suggest it be restricted to the territories and the already very large ridings in the north of all provinces except the Maritime provinces. I count about 16 of these.

If most of the rest of rural Canada is divided into 3-member ridings, there will inevitably be some districts that must be either 4 seats or 2 seats (because the remaining number of rural seats is not always going to be evenly divisible by 3).

Therefore, if the committee considers recommending a multiple-member system of proportional representation, such as the Single Transferable Vote or List PR, it might consider the following:

- 4 or 5 seat districts for urban areas
- 3 seats districts for most rural areas, with some 2 seat or 4 seat districts
- Single seat districts elected by plurality for the territories and other large ridings in the north

### **Five Principles of Electoral Reform**

















In the table below, I evaluate various voting systems by applying four of the five principles from the committee's mandate. My understanding of the fourth principle as listed in the mandate, "Integrity", is largely about the administrative practices of the voting system. I have no particular expertise in this area, but my understanding is that the high degree of integrity we currently enjoy in Canadian elections could be maintained under any other voting system under consideration. Online voting, however, would undoubtedly compromise the secrecy of the vote, and therefore reduce the voting system's integrity.

My evaluation, below, rates four different systems as highly satisfactory (green dot), satisfactory (yellow dot), or unsatisfactory (red dot). I recognize this evaluation is somewhat subjective, but it is based on the above analysis of first-past-the-post versus proportional systems.

Proportional systems clearly emerge as the most satisfactory, but which system the committee should recommend depends on how much weight the committee chooses to give to each principle.

The four systems I evaluate are:

- First-Past-the-Post (FPTP), the current system;
- Single Transferable Vote (STV), where I am assuming most districts would have either 3, 4, or 5 seats, but would likely include a few districts with just 1 or 2 seats;
- Mixed Member Proportional (MMP), where I am assuming the regional vote uses open lists, and about 35 per cent of seats are allocated through regional lists (as recommended by the Law Commission report of 2004);
- List Proportional Representation, where I am also assuming open lists, and districts with 3, 4, or 5 seats, but some exceptions with only 1 or 2.

	FPTP	STV	MMP	List PR
Effectiveness and legitimacy				
Engagement				
Accessibility and inclusiveness				
Local representation				

Some explanation:

- FPTP is unsatisfactory in terms of effectiveness and legitimacy, and in terms of engagement for all the reasons given above. In terms of accessibility and inclusiveness, it could be rated highly satisfactory on the basis of its simplicity, but the mandate states the proposed measure should avoid undue complexity “while respecting the other principles”. For this reason, I have given it only a satisfactory rating. In terms of local representation, it is unsatisfactory in terms of ensuring accountability, but is satisfactory in providing access to MPs for the resolution of concerns, and therefore I have given it a satisfactory rating.
- STV would be highly satisfactory in terms of effectiveness and legitimacy. However, I have rated it as satisfactory only because I am assuming a relatively low average number of seats per district which would somewhat limit the degree of proportionality in the election results. While I believe it would result in highly satisfactory outcomes in engagement, the level of complexity involved in translating votes into seats is satisfactory, but not ideal. STV would be highly satisfactory in terms of local representation.
- MMP with 35 per cent regional list seats would provide the highest degree of proportionality possible given the challenges of Canadian geography, and would provide a high degree of engagement. Like STV, the system involves a degree of complexity that while satisfactory is not ideal. While it maintains single-member districts, these would have to increase in size, and the size of the regions (which would be larger than the multiple-member districts foreseen for STV and List PR) would somewhat reduce the quality of local representation. But on balance, the system would provide satisfactory local representation.
- List PR is rated as satisfactory in terms of effectiveness and legitimacy for the same reason STV is rated satisfactory – a somewhat limited degree of proportionality. It would, however, provide highly satisfactory outcomes in terms of engagement, and in terms of accessibility and inclusiveness it avoids undue complexity while respecting the other principles, including local representation.