

Brief submitted to the Special Committee on Electoral Reform

Jean Pierre Derriennic

I sum up here the main conclusions of my book, published in 2016 by Presses de l'Université Laval : *Un meilleur système électoral pour le Canada / A Better Electoral System for Canada*, in three parts:

- 1- The main flaws of the present voting system.
- 2-The two reforms that must be avoided.
- 3- The two reforms that should be done and can work harmoniously together.

1- The main flaws of the present voting system.

1.1- It creates serious inequalities of influence among citizens, between those who live in less populated and more populated districts, and between those who live in districts where the winner has few votes more than his main adversary, and those who live in districts where the winner has a huge majority.

1.2- It makes necessary for many citizens to vote strategically, for one of the candidates who are able to win, rather than for the candidate they sincerely prefer.

1.3- It often prevents the government majority or the opposition from having any candidate elected in some provinces, with the consequence of exaggerating conflicts among different regions of the country.

1.4- It makes sometimes possible for a party to have more elected candidates than another party which had more citizen votes.

2- The two reforms that must be avoided.

2.1- Proportional representation in districts where large numbers of MPs are elected.

The usual arguments against proportional representation are justified only when this voting system makes difficult to form a stable government majority, by allowing too many political parties (six or more) to have elected MPs.

In districts with large numbers of seats, winning is not difficult for candidates of small parties having a weak support in the people.

Small numbers of MPs must therefore be elected in each district, in order to get a moderate proportional representation.

2.2- Mixed electoral systems, combining single-member districts with some kind of proportional representation.

Supposed advantages of mixed systems are rather illusory.

Single-member districts make representation local. But, as we will see later, local representation can be ensured as well or better by moderate proportional representation.

Additional MPs must not be elected in a parallel but in a compensatory way. If they are at least around two fifths of the total, the outcomes are approximately the same as with ordinary proportional representation.

If compensation is calculated in Canada as a whole, or in provinces having a large number of inhabitants, very small parties will be able to get MPs. A mixed system would therefore entail the same risk of political instability as proportional representation in districts where large numbers of MPs are elected.

Implementing this kind of reform would be difficult. That is the main reason for avoiding it.

A mixed system with a small number of compensatory MPs would not seriously redress the flaws of the present system.

In order to keep the present single-member districts and add enough compensatory seats, it would be necessary to increase the number of MPs from 325 to 540.

On the other hand, in order to keep the present total number of MPs, it would be necessary to create 130 compensatory seats and 195 newly demarcated single-member districts. It would be nearly impossible to do that before the next election.

3- The two reforms that should be done and can work harmoniously together.

3.1-Moderate proportional representation in districts of three to five seats.

Implementing this reform would not be difficult following these principles : the total number of MPs or their number for each province would not change ; contiguous districts would be joined together without changing their present limits ; in the new multi-member districts the ratio of MPs by inhabitants should be kept as equal as possible. Prince-Edward-Island would form one district with four seats. In other

provinces, the correct number of MPs would be met by combining districts with three, four or five seats.

The main danger of proportional representation, too many parties having MPs, would be avoided.

The main flaws of the present system would be avoided :

Inequalities of influence among citizens depending on where they live would be much smaller.

Strategic voting would not disappear but would be less necessary.

It would be nearly impossible that an important party get no MP in a region or a large province of the country.

It would be nearly impossible for a party to have more elected candidates than another party which had more citizen votes.

The principle of local representation would be kept quite well.

The ratio of the number of MPs to the number of inhabitants would be the same as now. MPs would not become less available for citizens.

The distance to meet them could be longer. In densely populated areas it would not be a serious difficulty. It could be a reason to keep three single-member districts in the nordic territories.

Multi-member districts could have an important advantage. A citizen who wants or needs to meet an MP, would have choices that do not exist now : to meet someone for whom he voted or not ; to meet an MP of the government majority or of the opposition.

For this last reason, a moderate proportional representation would offer a better local representation than a mixed system with single-member districts larger than the present ones, and compensatory MPs without any link to a local district.

Moderate proportional representation does not make strategic voting useless for citizens who prefer a small party with no chance of having one candidate elected. It is therefore desirable to have also ranked ballots.

3.2-Ranked ballots.

Ranked ballots should be, as a rule, a feature of any electoral system, because citizens should have the right to vote sincerely without having to suppose how others will vote and without being manipulated by opinion polls and rumours.

In single-member districts, ranking preferences rather than expressing one choice makes the results more legitimate, because all MPs are elected by a majority of voters.

Ranking preferences is possible also when choosing between lists of candidates in order to get a proportional result. It can be done by using the Single Transferable Vote, as in Ireland, or by ordering preferences between closed lists of candidates. And there is an intermediate formula between these two, that is described in my book.

Moderate proportional representation with ranked ballots makes possible to meet two demands : to avoid that small parties with weak support have MPs, which is bad for the efficiency of parliamentary governments ; and to take into account the opinions and needs of all citizens, including those who prefer a small party.

With the present system, the number of votes for small parties is limited by the fear of wasting votes. With ranked ballots, these parties would get a number of first preference corresponding to their real popular support.

Some MPs of large parties will be elected owing to second or third preferences of supporters of a small party, and they will be incited to take care of their opinions and needs, in order to get the same transfers in the future.

All parties would try to get the second preferences of supporters of other parties, and they would not exaggerate the ideological differences with them. It would be good for the civility and clarity of our public debate.

In conclusion, the instability resulting from a badly designed proportional representation and the useless complexity of a mixed system must be avoided, but a moderate proportional representation with ranked ballots should be done. This reform would redress the main flaws of the present voting system : all citizens would be able to vote sincerely and efficiently ; MPs and parties would be incited to take care of the opinions and needs of all citizens.
