

Submission to the Special Committee on Electoral Reform

Kenneth C. Dewar
Professor Emeritus
Department of History
Mount Saint Vincent University
Halifax, N.S.

Introduction

Electoral reform has been a subject of discussion in Canada, both provincially and nationally, for decades. It is on the national agenda again because of Prime Minister Trudeau's promise in the last election to end the "first-past-the-post" system if his party formed the next government. The Special Committee on Electoral Reform is thus faced with a loaded question: to consider *alternate* voting systems that might *replace* the current one. This would seem to rule out the status quo.

My submission is a cautionary one. I would begin by noting that judgments are often embedded in terminology. "First-past-the-post" has a vaguely negative connotation. First past what post? And what does it have to do with counting ballots? It sounds more like a horse race. One might think that "most-votes" would be a simpler description, as in "The person who receives the most votes wins." To which one might add that victory is usually won by a plurality of votes cast. As the excellent background paper prepared by the Library of Parliament suggests, a more accurate name for this system is "single member plurality," a rather more neutral term. Proponents of electoral reform also invariably describe this system as "outdated," or more particularly, "a relic of the Victorian era," which of course it is, as are political parties, federalism, and Canada itself.

The alternative to the "single member plurality" system most frequently discussed is some form of proportional representation, or PR. There are three good reasons for thinking that PR might make things worse rather than better.

1. Party fragmentation

The first is the support it would give to single-interest parties of various kinds (regional, ethnic, religious, ideological, etc.). It is quite possible that minority parties could win seats even without winning any single constituency, and that they would multiply. This fear is not limited to regional parties, but in a regionally diverse country such as Canada, we ought not to underestimate the nationalizing role that political parties historically have played (a point R. Kenneth Carty made in his submission to the Committee on July 27).

2. Professionalization

The second reason for caution is that under PR or its variants – mixed member proportional (MMP) is a frequently cited compromise model – members of Parliament, or a significant number of them, would no longer be tied to a particular constituency. Instead, they would be chosen by the contending parties and placed on lists from which MPs would be taken in proportion to the votes cast for each party.

It is often said, in support of PR, that this would benefit women, natives and other

"non-territorial" groups, and result in a more representative Parliament. While there is evidence that this has actually occurred in certain countries that have adopted PR (such as New Zealand), it takes a leap of faith to believe that this would necessarily occur, or that it would bring women, natives and others closer to the actual levers of power. What is just as likely to happen is that a cadre of professional politicians would become entrenched, accountable in theory to the nation as a whole, but in practice to the parties to whom they owe their selection.

3. Voter isolation

Finally, it is said that PR would result in fairer representation, because all voters would find their choices manifested in the membership of the House of Commons, and no votes would be "wasted." As someone who has "wasted" his vote throughout his adult life (by the standard of whether, more often than not, my candidate has actually won), I am puzzled by this standard of fairness.

According to this argument, choosing a candidate in an election carries no cost; everyone wins, as long as one's party achieves a minimal level of support elsewhere. The voter, in this view, is purely an individual, not a member of a community whose purpose it is to elect a representative to Parliament who, in some sense, will speak for the community as a whole. This seems to me the strongest reason of all for being skeptical of PR (or MPR), because it discourages engagement at the local level, arguing for one's ideas and policies in one's community, hoping to win over those who disagree rather than simply ignoring them in favour of a disembodied constituency elsewhere.

Conclusion

In the interests of engagement and local representation especially, then, I urge Committee members to recommend some form of "plurality or majority electoral" voting (using the categories employed in the Library of Congress background paper). Retention of the current system, or possibly of some version of the alternative vote or ranked ballot, would also meet two other criteria guiding the Committee's deliberations: advancing effectiveness and legitimacy, and accessibility and inclusiveness. Finally, it would serve the end of "safeguarding public trust in the election process, by ensuring reliable and verifiable results obtained through an effective and objective process that is secure and preserves vote secrecy for individual Canadians" (quoting from the Committee mandate).

My point here, if you will forgive the cliché, is Shakespeare's: "Striving to better, oft we mar what's well." The "single member plurality" system has historically provided Canada effective government, resulting often in strong majority governments (usually based on a plurality of votes) and occasionally in effective minority governments.