

A Reformed Electoral System that all of Canada's Major Parties Can Support

A Brief to the House of Commons Special Committee on Electoral Reform

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1. Partisanship and the Need to Find Compromise by the Committee

Much has been said of alternative voting processes and much has been claimed as the best approach. Sides have been drawn, essentially along partisan lines, which complicates the process of arriving at a majority recommendation to the House. Failure of the Committee to propose a widely supported alternative to FPTP will assure that the wide majority of Canadians as represented by parties favouring a fairer system will be defeated by a minority who wish to retain the FPTP system. The NDP and Greens favour proportional representation (PR), the Conservatives favour FPTP, and the Liberals voted down PR over preferential voting (PV) at a recent national convention and have committed to not having FPTP (only) elections again. No one expects the Cabinet to enforce a solution, least of all one that favours the Liberals, if the Committee can not find a consensus.

Judging from the number of briefs and presenters to your committee, one would be left with the impression that a seriously contorted system such as MMP, whereby Canada-wide proportionality is achieved at any price, is *de rigueur*. Others have cautioned that it has been turned down by voters in 3 provinces. The basic reason it failed was because it was perceived as 'un-natural' in its overhead of rules and its power to distort the direct relationship of a voter to their representative in Parliament. It may fit well with the many academics who have provided their learned opinions to your Committee but the average man, when faced with reality, does not want the complications of PR voting.

For the Committee to be successful it needs to find a solution which naturally contains elements of first past the post, preferential and proportion voting procedures for MP election from existing ridings. The question is whether each Party on your Committee can find enough to satisfy its agenda.

2. Problems with Current Representation at the Riding Level

- a. Most ridings return a winner by plurality - rather than electing a person who has a clear majority of support. The result is resentment against the plurality winner by those seeing themselves in the (unrepresented) majority.
- b. Some minority voters resent the option of a vote for a probable loser, or voting strategically for an option to thwart an even lesser valued option. Allowing the conflicted voter, *at least those who wish*, to indicate an alternative should their first/principal candidate falter would be fairer and a welcomed relief to many.
- c. The accumulation of votes against the winning candidate in a riding is popularly taken as a measure of unwavering opposition to the winner. No measure of any willingness to compromise - to seek a consensus - is offered in the FPTP results.

3. Proportional Representation at the Riding Level -- Not at the National Level

The PR methods, that have been proposed by others, seek to address the lack of direct representation for Parties having a larger fraction of voting support than fraction of the seats in Parliament by concocting specially added 'super' members, each representing a collection of ridings. The decision on how the elected members will compromise is taken out of hands of the people and given to the augmented MPs to determine how much accommodation their Party's supporters will tolerate. Such implied lack of the degree of willingness to compromise by each party's voters, in the inevitability of minority governments, can seriously weaken the effective

decision making by the Government, and seriously weaken Canada.

FPTP election by plurality builds confrontation, not shared responsibility. Perpetuated, it tends to alienate and reinforce differences in political values between people, feeding the tendency to 'Us' and 'They'.

The trick is to find a way to send a riding's most valued representative to Ottawa, as historically implied in the FPTP method, and find a consensus that determines how much support he has from different Party's voters, as sought by PR methods.

The answer - rather surprisingly - is to use *Preferential Voting* to assemble both a majority and a statement of the fraction of support from the Parties contesting the riding.

A majority winner implies that the riding has found a consensus among those willing to compromise. A properly constructed counting system will follow how many voters of each Party ended up supporting the winner. The winner walks away with the mantel of victory but the yoke of having to answer to those who switched from their first choice. Failure to respect this proportionality can lead to a very different willingness to compromise at the next election.

4. Suggested New Voting Method

As I am sure, Committee members are aware that most, if not all, political parties utilize a simple, straightforward method at, say leadership, conventions which includes all the elements listed above. A voter may support his/her principal choice until that person either wins a majority of votes cast or is forced to drop off the ballot by finishing last at some stage of the multi-vote procedure. A voter whose candidate is eliminated has the choice to continue to vote for remaining candidates until a victor is declared. Many more than politicians attending such nominations have viewed the procedure on their TVs, understand it, and are comfortable with the method.

It is important to recognize that all three of the suggested methods - FPTP, preferential and

proportional voting - are contained in 'Convention' voting. Besides:

- a. The winner has the *largest number of votes and a majority on the last ballot*. This allows the winner to have a solid base of support to function.
- b. Voters have been offered the choice of moving their *preferred support* and thereby of having a voice in the final outcome. There is disappointment when a preferred candidate is forced off the ballot, but very few do not switch their support as the prize is important to them - the *best representative* of those voting.
- c. The results of subsequent votes are announced at each stage of elimination. The convention (riding) knows who has gathered behind the winner and the *proportion of power that the winner will need to share* with those who made it possible. Failure to share power is a known path to subsequent loss of that power.

5. How can 'Convention' voting be implemented in a General Election?

The answer: very simply.

Basic Process:

The voter indicates their principal choice as we do on our ballot papers now.

The voter is allowed the option, should they wish, *upon the elimination of their current principal candidate* at some stage of the voting, to indicate they wish to switch their principal candidate to another candidate.

One piece of paper, fill in 2 choices - names of principal and alternative, if principal is eliminated.

Extended Process:

If the Committee wished, it could extend the process to allow the voter to switch again if previous preferences were eliminated. That is, as say an alternative is eliminated, the voter's choice automatically switches to their next alternative.

Priviso:

As is all too abundantly clear with the recent Australian General Election, it is time to *move to electronic aids to achieve more accurate and quicker counts*. The above 'Convention' voting process is ideally suited for keeping track of (individual) preferences at various distinct stages of counting. Counting by hand, depending on the depth of preferences allowed, that election day staff would take maybe days to accomplish, would be complete in seconds using a (very small) computer (like a Notepad) in each poll. The communication of local poll results to the Returning Office would happen within 10's of minutes after the polls close. Regional results would be finalized almost as quickly. Security would be high because the device is under the control of the DRO at all times and, if it is downloaded to the Internet, the DRO retains a copy of the (known and certifiable) results which can be subsequently carried to the Returning Office.

6. How to Hold Majoritive Winners Responsible to their Riding Coalition Partners

As discussed above, there is a moral responsibility for the majority winner of any riding coalition formed during the proposed method of voting to reach out to those who made it possible. However, that may not be enough without creating some explicit obligation on the riding winner.

A model for such obligation building can be found also in Convention voting. Historically when a Party in Convention seeks to elect a new leader it is not uncommon for the candidates to seek conditional agreements between themselves *prior* to voting which imply future co-operation after the Convention.

Such an obligation on the winner can be created by the Parties also *prior* to the election, most likely during the campaign, offering to work with a potential coalition seeking partner on an issue

of importance to that coalition partner. For example the Liberals might offer the NDP a proposal to create national day-care or the NDP might ask the Liberals for support in pension reform if they are elected. The Conservatives might offer all Parties a proposal to change the rules of order in the House for more free votes. Presumably such offers will have been negotiated privately by the Parties ahead of any announcement that is made. In return each Party may ask its supporters to consider moving their vote after they have first supported their principal candidate on the basis of these understandings.

In this way a coalition of purpose on at least one main policy issue is developed before the MPs representing significant support from two or more Parties enter the House.

This procedure will assure that voters switching their support, upon the elimination of their principal candidate, to another Party will see the value of doing so. It will also serve as a trigger for a new coalition at the next election should one Party or another renege on its offer of joint action.

Having a distinct benefit will also remove the stigma for too many voters of not being able to see any value or see it as a necessary evil in supporting an alternative should their first choice falter.

Having an understanding on co-operation on major contentious issues prior to Parliament being called will increase the possibilities of major legislation passing.

Credentials:

The proponent has

- a. Acted on numerous occasions as an election day worker at different levels for Elections Canada
- b. Acted as an election observer for Canada in 2 missions to Ukraine and 1 to Palestine

- c. Served as a municipal councillor (Ancaster)
- d. Sought election at the provincial and federal level, advocating electoral reform
- e. Was a principal organizer of “Citizen’s Referendum” on amalgamation of cities and towns of the County of Wentworth into Hamilton
- f. Was an external participant in online discussion groups about electoral reform during Ontario ‘Citizens Assembly on Electoral Reform’
- g. Has written numerous political commentaries in the media, recently on Electoral and Senate Reform