

Comments and Proposals on the Democratic Reform Elements in the
Review of the Election Act

Presented by the Forum jeunesse de l'île de Montréal (FJÎM)

Special Committee on Electoral Reform of the Parliament of Canada

September 2016

Introduction

The Forum jeunesse de l'île de Montréal (FJÎM) was created in 2000 to ensure that the needs of young people aged 35 and under are taken into account in the social, economic and cultural development of the region. It coordinates projects and promotes the interests of its members, who come from student, socio-economic and community, arts and culture, and sports and recreation backgrounds. Each year, its 17 directors are democratically elected by more than 150 delegates at the Regional Youth Event.

FJÎM has been active for many years in the debate on the reform of democratic institutions, and has presented several briefs on this issue. It was fundamental for young Montrealers in FJÎM to participate in this crucial stage in the evolution of our democracy. The crisis of representation, the growing lack of confidence in our political elites and the distortions of the election show that immediate change is required to the voting system, which has created a distressing gap between civil society and its political representatives.

The creation of a special committee on electoral reform suggests that the federal government sincerely wants to find social consensus on this fundamental issue.

Following consultations with youth, we presented a brief in 2005 to the Quebec National Assembly's Select Committee on the Election Act. Today, owing to a lack of resources (funding cuts to the Forums jeunesse régionaux du Québec by the provincial government in April 2015) and the short time frame of the current consultations, we are presenting the brief we drafted in 2005.

Our remarks therefore address voting system reform at the provincial level. However, our proposals, analyses and examples can easily be applied to the federal context.

The Forum jeunesse de l'île de Montréal is pleased to participate in these consultations. We are presenting our brief today to target some key elements to take into consideration in studying reform of the first-past-the-post system.

We believe the following three core principles must guide the reform:

- Achieving greater proportionality between the popular vote and the number of elected representatives from each party: we recommend the adoption of a mixed system where roughly 60% of the members would be elected on a territorial basis and 40% on a proportional basis to the popular vote;

- Achieving an equal representation between men and women: we suggested for this use, for the proportional vote, consist of lists to respect this parity;
- Gradually increasing the representation of ethnocultural minorities and young people in the electorate

Make every vote count!

FJÎM has studied the various systems and attempted to come up with a proposal that reflects its principles and the values defended by youth. It became clear that the mixed member proportional system is the one that best meets our expectations. However, it is important to look at the specific characteristics of such an electoral system, because mixed member proportional systems are not necessarily always the same.

We agree with maintaining a majority of seats based on territorial constituencies. To reach 60% of the make-up of Parliament, in the interest of preserving strong regional representation and the natural link between the elected representative and their region, we propose retaining 78 single-member territorial constituencies using the federal electoral map for Quebec. Where protecting the exclusive representation of certain territories is important, for example the Magdalen Islands, the number of territorial constituencies could vary slightly.

The real problem lies in establishing a system that would elect more members (40% of Parliament) so as to best ensure that every vote counts in a plurality system. We support the allocation of compensatory seats from a single list provided by each political party. We believe that such an allocation, determined by calculating the gap between the seats won in the constituencies and the percentage of the popular vote won by each party, is the only one that most fully compensates for the democratic deficit created by the first-past-the-post system in territorial constituencies. Between the current system and a purely proportional system, it is an acceptable compromise that preserves regional representation while giving citizens the chance to have their vote truly count.

Analyses carried out at the provincial level already show this very well: a party would have to win at least 15% of the popular vote in a given constituency to win a single compensatory seat.¹ For real reform, forget it! The regional issue should not be used to shore up critics. We strongly believe that the representation of Quebec's regional

¹ Brief by the Mouvement démocratie nouvelle (MDN), presented as part of the consultations on the Election Act, 2005

characteristics can be sufficiently preserved by allocating 60% of the seats to regional constituencies. We want real change that respects the will of the people and do not want to see government act only for show.

To recap, we recommend:

The implementation of a mixed-member proportional system including single-member plurality seats for territorial constituencies and compensatory seats from a provincial list allocated based on the difference between the percentage of the popular vote and the territorial seats won by the parties.

To better illustrate the effect of such a change, we imagined the make-up of the National Assembly, based on the election results of April 14, 2003, if a mixed-member system existed. Of course, if such a system did exist, along with its specific characteristics (which we will look at later), it would probably have impacted the results of the popular vote itself, and this simulation is only imaginary.

However, it allows us to see the major changes that would result. The government would be formed by the Quebec Liberal Party, but it would be a minority government and thus forced to govern with the agreement of the two other main parties. See the table below for details.

Table: Simulation of the make-up of the National Assembly based on the electoral results of April 14, 2003, applied to a mixed-member proportional system (75 territorial constituencies + national compensatory list of 50 members)²

Party	Elected members (2003)	% of elected members (2003)	Members in 75 constituencies	% of popular vote (2003)	Compensatory correction	Simulated total (125 seats)
PQ	45	36 %	27	33.24	15 (41.55)	42
PLQ	76	60.8 %	46	45.99	12 (57.48)	58
ADQ	4	3.2 %	2	18.18	21 (22.72)	23
UFP	0	0	0	1.06	1 or 2 (1.325)	1 or 2
Bloc Pot	0	0	0	0.60	0 or 1 (0.75)	0 or 1

² Sources: Chief Electoral Officer of Quebec (www.dgeq.qc.ca) and the National Assembly of Quebec (www.assnat.qc.ca). [in French only]

The fact of promoting a system as we describe it does not resolve all issues. It will take a bit more time to examine some details that might be controversial. We therefore believe that some guidelines must be established to avoid overly fragmenting Parliament. We therefore recommend:

That the parties entitled to compensatory seats from a provincial list meet the following two conditions:

- *Present candidates in a majority of territorial constituencies*
- *Win at least one (1) territorial seat or 3% of the popular vote*

Real choice

We believe that the first-past-the-post system limits the impact of voter choice. The introduction of a mixed-member system seems to be a particularly promising way to give more weight to votes and ensure better party representation in Parliament. Countries that have adopted a mixed-member system provide a clear example: between 20% and 35% of voters use "vote splitting,"³ meaning that they give their support to the candidate of one party in their territorial constituency (often to prevent the candidate from another party being elected, or simply because the candidate from the party they wish to support has no chance of winning) and give their support to another party on the list with their second vote.

We strongly believe that only the introduction of a ballot separating the vote between the territorial constituency and the compensatory list can correct the current democratic deficit and give citizens the right to make a real choice. The most frequent criticisms of a system involving two separate votes concerns the supposed complexity of the process, which could turn voters off. We do not agree with this criticism. First, several countries already using two-vote systems and have not experienced any major problems or a decline in voter participation. In Quebec, the practice of multiple votes already exists. Since the 2005 municipal elections, many voters have had to vote 3, 4 and even 5 times. We therefore recommend:

That the vote take place in two steps: first by voting for one of the candidates in the territorial constituency, then by voting for a candidate on the compensatory list.

Gender parity

³ Massicotte, Louis. La révision du mode de scrutin. À la recherche d'un mode de scrutin mixte compensatoire pour le Québec. Working Paper. Government of Quebec (2004). [in French only]

FJÎM believes that the way forward is by requiring a certain degree of parity through the introduction of alternating male/female candidates on the list for the proportional vote.

Some might question the relevance of using such a strong method. But we must realize that, despite the cultural evolution of our society, in 2016, only 26% of members in the House of Commons are women. Public education and various incentives have their limitations. Political parties, who we give some of the responsibility for change, will not act alone. The primary purpose of an organization such as a political party, notwithstanding the shared values of its members, is to win the election. It is not and will never be to solve the problems of gender representation in Quebec's democratic institutions. And it will certainly never become that based on financial incentives that do not even require organizations to achieve concrete objectives for representation.

It is the Canadian state, the collective tool of all citizens, that must ensure parity and equality between men and women without regard to the special interests of political parties. If it must use legislation to do so, so be it. The only condition such legislation should seek to address is quality. The state should not seek to impose parity without regard to the result.

We therefore recommend:

That the list for the compensatory proportional vote be composed of alternating men and women.

Unlike the financial incentive currently on the table, this proposal guarantees the appointment by political parties of women who are truly ready to perform their duties. In fact, nothing prevents a party (it's actually widespread practice) from running candidates for show in constituencies known to be unwinnable. In the case at hand and as a matter of money, many of these candidates will be women who stand no chance of ever becoming a member. However, if a political party knows that the women on the compensatory list will be named members, it will choose them carefully.

Of course, it is always unfortunate to have to legislate changes that society is not able to otherwise produce. We do not want a rule imposing parity between men and women to persist indefinitely in our political institutions. The day the Parliament of Canada is made up of as many women as men, and we have managed to correct the cultural imbalance that had existed for so long, it may be possible to eliminate the formula that we are proposing today.

Members of cultural communities

Our comments above about women also apply to candidates from ethnocultural minorities. Unfortunately, in this case, no one-size-fits-all legislation will help correct the situation. Two major problems arise.

First, the definition of a “member of a cultural community” is problematic. How do we determine that an individual belongs to a cultural community? We can’t. Depending on the government program, law or department, membership may be determined by a voluntary statement or by various criteria. It is hard to believe that a financial incentive system for political parties would not be rife with abuses and inconsistencies. The government must clarify this issue.

For the same reasons applying to gender parity, we do not believe that the current proposal will have the desired effect. A truly effective incentive should link funding to the percentage of elected representatives, not candidates. It should also ensure that additional funding award an increased representation of cultural communities, aiming for higher minimum targets than the results actually achieved by political parties.

We therefore recommend:

That the Government of Canada created a financial incentive for political parties tied to an increase in the proportion of members elected from cultural communities in order to directly encourage increased representation from these communities and prevent abuses and inconsistencies.

Preparing for the future

As an organization advocating civic engagement, FJÎM is particularly concerned with the importance of youth participation in the Canadian democratic system. Canada does not have the means, demographic or financial, to exclude its youth from the democratic process. Institutional reforms must take youth into account, because they are our future. We therefore expect:

That the Government of Canada incorporate into the electoral act mechanisms to increase the representation of youth in the House of Commons, for example through better support for young people under 35 who wish to enter politics.

Conclusion

The Forum jeunesse de l'île de Montréal wishes to underscore the principles that have long guided its stance regarding the future of Canadian democratic institutions. The politicization of the younger generations and their place in the democratic arena are essential to ensure the sustainability of the Canadian political system.

The debate is just beginning, and we'll be there to the end!