

# **The North Atlantic Triangle and Electoral Reform**

**Address to the Special Committee on Electoral Reform  
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## **I. Introduction**

I thank the Special Committee for the invitation to speak today on such an important topic. Its discussion has long been missing at the federal level and the Committee from all reports has been diligent in pursuing it.

Because of the short time-line between my invitation to speak (under three weeks) and the fact that I do not usually publish in this particular area (electoral reform), I assume I have been invited for my generalist abilities and the fact I have written or edited several textbooks used in a number of Canadian political science departments. I in fact have a general perspective on electoral matters that is not one of the usual ones and I would be curious to hear the reactions of the Committee members to it. What is unusual is the international perspective which runs through it.

## **II. The nature of the North Atlantic Triangle**

The US, Canada and the UK, the three major countries of the North Atlantic – I call them, as some have in the past, the “North Atlantic Triangle,” - are generally portrayed as holdouts, as stubborn resisters to a global trend toward proportional representation or majoritarian electoral systems, or national systems bound to be affected by the experimentation going on in their regional legislatures.

My point is that the political calculus used by those political leaders who retain the simple plurality system – the leaders of the northern English-speaking countries - is actually quite complex, but is almost never enunciated. The furthest the literature usually goes is to intuit that parties who advocate PR or other alternatives to FPTP consistently change their mind after forming government based on self-interest. Partisan self-interest is further usually described as the likelihood of getting reelected. If the party got this far under SMP, the reasoning is said to go, history is likely to repeat itself. Electoral reform is the preserve of the politically weak.

But reelected for what? Prestige? Patronage? Philosophy? No doubt there is an element of all these in the decision not to pursue electoral reform. There is however a fourth “P.” Power. Power is instrumental to the other values listed above; it helps to attain them. But power shared is power diluted. It does small good to be elected and not be able to attain one’s aims because of the need to share power with others in, say, a coalition. The countries of the North Atlantic Triangle have another concern, and that is retaining the relative power of each to each other. This has been an historic aim, one which seems on the face of it incompatible with the power sharing which would come under many forms of electoral reform.

### III. The history of the North Atlantic Triangle concept

Of course, the North Atlantic Triangle concept came about for reasons other than electoral considerations. It was primarily a concept used to describe the important close, but uneven, relationships between the ABC countries, America, Britain and Canada, primarily by Canadian foreign affairs officials and academics. "From the Treaty of Washington in 1871 to the Suez Crisis of 1956," says Hector Mackenzie, "Canada's view of the world and the conduct of its international affairs were largely determined by its relationships with Britain and the USA."<sup>1</sup>

With the exception of the WWII years, when the influence of the three as close as it would ever be, the UK and US were unaware of the triangular relationship. The stakes, although important for all, were by far the largest for Canada. The relationship between the US and UK were preeminent, and known as "the special relationship" after Winston Churchill gave it that name in a 1945 speech.

For Canada, however, the stakes in the triangular relationship were of great importance. The Rowell-Sirois Commission report of 1940 described it thus:

Canada's position is similar to that of a small man sitting in a big poker game. He must play for the full stakes, but with only a fraction of the capital resources of two substantial opponents: if he wins, he profits in relation to his capital are very large, and if he loses, he may be cleaned out.<sup>2</sup>

Matters have not changed much, although the circle of players has widened somewhat. Many international diplomatic and trade issues can take on an existential hue for Canada while still appearing of lesser import to others.

Occasionally the triangle concept reappears in other contexts. Neary as well as Mackenzie have used it as a tool to discuss issues among international actors involved in the changing status of Newfoundland.<sup>3</sup> Haglund has resurrected a certain amount of interest in using the concept for modern Canadian foreign policy.<sup>4</sup>

I suggest here that one context where the North American/British order is relevant is consideration of electoral system reform. More precisely, the effect on the electoral system on the decision making system involved in international relations is of importance to national leaders. It would be surprising if they did not consider the effects of possible electoral change on the relative power and effectiveness of national decision makers. The next section elaborates.

#### **IV. Cultural Characteristics of the North Atlantic Triangle in electoral matters**

National electoral systems of long duration can be seen as reflections of the cultural makeup of the working leadership of the country. In the case of the Triangle countries, they as well have functions which underpin the power dynamics. The cultural and functional purposes of the systems follow.

A. Electoral reform is a contextual element of the political system. Contextual elements are those that form part of the basic architecture of the system. Changes to one such element affect other elements of the system. Political parties leadership, and some Canadians, understand this basic relationship and when they contemplate changes to the electoral system, they realize that other aspects of the basic architecture will be changed. The calculus of decision is therefore complicated and prone to more cautious approaches that is the usual case with many public policy decisions. It is as if electoral reform is one part of institutional architecture; all must be considered together.

B. The countries of the North American Triangle demonstrate a consensus about the shape of the shape of national decision-making structure and the need to keep its outlines in basic alignment with each other. Changes to the national legislatures that would change this alignment have seldom made it to the national agenda, and if they do make it, they don't last long.<sup>5</sup> Electoral reform is one such item which has usually not been part of the national agendas in the three countries.

C. The North American Triangle consensus is especially important in matters of international diplomacy, international conflict/peacekeeping, and trade and environmental policies. Decision-makers in these matters tend to place special emphasis on interpersonal relationships between leaders and an expectation that their basic nature will not change markedly.

D. Sometimes the consensus goes by other names. In his Iron Curtain Speech after World War II, Winston Churchill coined the term the "special relationship" to describe the UK-US relationship, describing it as "Fraternal association [requiring] not only the growing friendship and mutual understanding between our two vast but kindred systems of society, but the continuance of the intimate relationship" between the two militaries. "At the United Nations," say Gabriel Scheinmann & Raphael Cohen, "only a handful of countries, like Canada and the Marshall Islands, vote more frequently with the United States than the United Kingdom."<sup>6</sup> Recently Barack Obama referred to the "unique relationship" between Canada and the US in much the same terms. The UK looked to Canada first when it needed help to set up a new International Trade department after Brexit and the two countries talked about setting up closer trade relationships.

E. The notion of a special relationship between members of the NA Triangle should not give rise to ideas of equality, because often the power relations are distinctly uneven.

Further, the nature of the relationships gives rise to the need “agile” relationships between the members, and it is in light of this need that considerations of the nature of the electoral system will be considered later in this presentation.

## **V. Characteristics of the North American Triangle.**

A. The NA Triangle involves common assumptions about what the preferred nature of decision making should be. It amounts to a kind of summit diplomacy where international and federal/provincial/territorial relations are concerned and a commitment to elite accommodation in government-citizen relations. The elites are assumed to speak on behalf of their respective social groups and the groups largely acquiesce in the decisions taken by their representatives.

B. It is therefore compatible with concepts like responsible government and disciplined parties in the UK and Canada. In fact, the electoral system takes on an order of importance largely the same as these two concepts (cite xx). This is not the case with the US system of course.

C. There is a tendency for a restricted number of effective national parties. An effective party is one that is a realistic alternative to form government. There may be non-mainstream parties, but between them they share a small percentage of the national vote. The few larger parties take on a specific nature, being brokerage, or “catch-all” parties.

D. Most, if not all, of the major parties share a cultural response to non-FPTP systems: that they are not a matter for the national systemic agenda. Such parties may occasionally contribute to putting such systems on the wider, public, agenda, but such contributions are not of long duration.

E. All these countries have in fact experimented with non-FPTP systems at the regional level. Of interest is the tendency for these regional experiments to have a demonstration effect on national reforms.

F. In each of the countries the executive – the President or the Prime Minister and Cabinet has a special role in matters of international diplomacy, international conflict/peacekeeping, and trade and environmental policies. The role is more pronounced in the Westminster systems, but even in the US the President has a generative or motor force in national decision making.

G. There is a distaste for coalitions/power sharing in two of the three systems. They are perceived to weaken accountability and predictability. The UK and Canada have in fact experienced coalitions, but they are infrequent and regarded as aberrations from the normal. Power sharing is part of the constitutional makeup of the US, but there is in fact a growing distaste for partisan compromise. Even before the 2016 election tension, a

large scale Pew poll found that “Republicans and Democrats are further apart ideologically than at any point in recent history.”<sup>7</sup>

H. A closely related tendency is the emphasis on accountability in the three systems. Accountability means, first, the assignment of responsibilities to others by a person or body in authority, accompanied by expectations about what is to be performed: second, the obligation to answer for performance or non-performance by those persons or bodies assigned such responsibilities.

I. Also related, and highly valued by the actors involved, is the emphasis on predictability in intergovernmental relations. Predictability, the ability to deliver on promises or commitments made in the context of international diplomacy, is a useful short-run alternative to more formal instruments.

J. When they do consider systemic reform and streamlining, North American Triangle countries typically consider reforms of the executive rather than the legislative branch. Their considerations have to do with concerns like efficiency and effectiveness, which are more of interest to executives, rather than representativeness and equality, which are particularly legislative concerns.

## **VI. The effects of abandoning FPTP on the North Atlantic model**

Part of the reasoning process of governments and societies when they consider the prospect of abandoning the FPTP model involves the effects on the larger international context we have been describing. To be sure, matters like partisan advantage and just plain inertia figure in as well, but the issue of stability and predictability is just as important. Some of the likely results of a movement to a more PR-oriented system would be:

A. *shorter cabinet life*. Majority governments tend across western world tend to have longer lives than other forms. Single-party minority governments have the shortest, and coalitions next shortest. Although Canada has limited experience with coalition governments, it is safe to say that coalitions would be a viable option under a PR-oriented system in Canada, as it has been the case elsewhere. The duration of coalition governments is of course not pre-determined – some last a long time – but in general coalitions are beset with risks that don’t face majorities and are thus more unstable. Planning is therefore more perilous.

B. *power-sharing prime ministers*. In Westminster systems, prime ministers enjoy a number of prerogatives which are usually unchallenged in the normal run of the mill majority government. Choice of the ministry, of the organizational form of the executive government, of senior appointments, of meeting dates of parliament, are just a few. With coalitions being a more likely scenario in a country with coalition government, these prerogatives are likely to be challenged. The makeup of the ministry

is an obvious case in point. Power shared, as we noted, is power diminished, in the view of practising FPTP leadership.

C. *changes in party form*. It has been noted, following Kirchheimer's 1966 thesis,<sup>8</sup> that western parties since WWII have taken on the nature of "catch-all parties". These are large mainstream parties distinguished by their primacy of votes over ideology, by centrist electoral appeals to ever larger groups of voters, and elitist party organizations. This is just the sort of party organization that Triangle leaders want to have at their disposal when seeking relative advantage in international relations. They are less likely to like the alternative offered up by the coalitions or other party forms that are the likely products of PR or related electoral systems. They are the opposite of the catch-all characteristics.

D. *a new form of international relations*. The ensemble of these factors would in turn have effects on the international relations of the three countries.

- Less predictability in international relations stances
- More effective partners to consider in international relations
- Possibly divided stances in international policies.
- More difficulty for the smaller partners in the triangle – UK and Canada – to devise successful strategies

## **VII. Historic junctures which demonstrate the case**

Governments prove their distaste for power sharing by certain characteristic patterns of behaviour. Together these actions add up to centralized power, and a distaste for sharing it.

A. International diplomacy and even central-regional relations are kept to the comfortable context of elite accommodation. Elites can make assumptions about each other's behaviour and its predictability. At times predictability is interpreted as the presumption that past international commitments carry with them an expectation of future commitments: witness the respective pressures put on Canada and the UK at the time of the beginning of the Iraq War.

B. Unless hemmed in by court decisions and public opinion, governing parties – or those that are likely to be so - engage in a vigorous cartel-like behaviour. Political parties respond to declining public involvement by turning to state resources but doing so in a collusive manner. Parties on the ground may be weaker, but parties in public office gained strength by a robust system of state subventions, preferential access to state-supported media and erecting barriers to new party system entrants who may threaten the established parties.<sup>9</sup>

C. The pattern that western nations use unnecessarily undemocratic practices to negotiate and operate international trade agreements. Democratic processes would see a heightened level of public participation in the negotiation of agreements and the ongoing decision making that follows. Instead, it is rare to have interested NGOs and citizens granted observer status in negotiations, and at ongoing meetings afterwards. Trade dispute resolution is similar: NGOs and citizens tend not to have access to documents used in trade disputes, to attend trade panels, or to make briefs to them. As Robert F. Housman points out, such lacunae give unfortunate lessons to already undemocratic nations and in are not in place as lessons for the wider international relations and laws of the democratic nations.<sup>10</sup>

D. The Triangle countries resist incursions by legislatures into the conduct of armed conflicts and wars. In Canada and the UK decisions to enter into armed conflicts is still legally a prerogative power, although there has been some openness in recent years to Parliamentary roles. In the US, the War Powers Act is not much of a deterrent to determined Presidents.

## **VII. Implications**

In this context, the almost total disinterest by national governments in reform of the reigning national electoral paradigm - FPTP – seems a natural bookend. Undertaking electoral reform - in Canada, specifically - would have wrestle with some interesting issues:

1. Our Triangle allies would still be using national electoral systems which usually yield determined majorities. Since we continue to be engaged in diplomatic, conflict and trade issues with them – to say nothing of a host of other international partners - issues that are usually dealt with by restricted numbers of participants, Canada’s options would seem to be:
  - a. a form of electoral reform which is closer to non-proportional than to proportional results. Or
  - b. a national commitment to values other than predictability and strategic advantage in international affairs, and electoral systems that match these values. Or
  - c. abandoning the electoral reform initiative as too problematical, and retain the status quo.
2. Since there is an institutional architecture at work here – electoral reform is part of a national power structure - the issue of wider institutional reform applies here. Reformers of the electoral system should be ready to apply their logic to wider vistas of institutional reform.

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<sup>1</sup> Hector Mackenzie, "Delineating the North American Triangle: The Second World War and its Aftermath," *The Round Table* (January 2006) 95: 383 101-112 at 102.

<sup>2</sup> (Canada, Royal Commission on Dominion-Provincial Relations, *Report*, p. 182)

<sup>3</sup> Neary, P. 1988. *foundland and the North Atlantic World, 1929-1949*. Kingston: McGill-Queen's UP.; Mackenzie, D. 1986. *Inside the Atlantic Triangle: Canada and the entrance of Newfoundland into Confederation, 1939=1949*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.

<sup>4</sup> Haglund, David. 2000. *The North Atlantic Triangle Revisited: Canadian Grand Strategy at Century's End*. Toronto: Canadian Institute of International Affairs and Irwin Publishing.

<sup>5</sup> Recent reform initiatives or active consideration at the national levels were: in the UK were, during the long Labour interregnum, 1979-1997 and the Jenkins Report, 1998; in Canada, the Lortie Commission, 1992, various consultations, 2004-2007, and the 2015 general election; and in the US, during the Progressive Era in a number of municipalities

<sup>6</sup> Gabriel Scheinmann & Raphael Cohen "The Not-So-Special Relationship," *The American Interest*, June 5, 2014.

<http://www.the-american-interest.com/2014/06/05/the-not-so-special-relationship/>  
See also United States, Department of State, , *Voting Practices in the United Nations 2012*, Report to Congress Submitted Pursuant to Public Laws 101 - 246 and 108 - 447 April 2013 <http://www.state.gov/documents/organization/208072.pdf>

<sup>7</sup> Carroll Doherty, " 7 things to know about polarization in America," Pew Research Centre. June 12, 2014. <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2014/06/12/7-things-to-know-about-polarization-in-america/>

<sup>8</sup> see one explanation of it in O. Kirchheimer (1966a), 'The Transformation of Western European Party Systems', in J. LaPalombara and M. Weiner (eds.), *Political Parties and Political Development* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press), pp.177–200.

<sup>9</sup> Katz, Richard S. and Peter Mair (1995) 'Changing Models of Party Organization and Party Democracy: The Emergence of the Cartel Party', *Party Politics* 1: 5-28.

<sup>10</sup> Robert F. Housman, "Democratizing International Trade Decision-Making," *Cornell International Law Journal*, 27:3 Article 9 (1994), 77-747.