

**Brief to the Special Committee on Electoral Reform (ERRE),
Parliament of Canada,
by David Fraser, Ottawa, Ontario, 29 September 2016**

This submission may not bring anything new to the discussion, and is simply a statement of the views of one Canadian citizen who wishes to add his voice to the many who strongly support proportional representation (PR).

Current situation and the need for PR

Our current system is dysfunctional and leads to perverse results, such as false majorities, to the dictatorship of a minority, and to a feeling of exclusion and futility for the majority of citizens whose votes effectively do not count under the current first-past-the-post (FPTP) system. We have to get away from the idea of majoritarian government and from the idea of winners and losers, and move towards the idea of representation. Every voter should be able to vote with the full confidence that their vote will count and will matter equally, and will lead to some proportionate representation of their perspective and beliefs in the House of Commons.

Under the current system, we get perverse results where 39% of the vote can elect a government that receives 100% of the power. Furthermore, when low voter turnout is factored in, the percentage of eligible voters needed to elect a majority government under FPTP can be as low as 24% (e.g., the 2011 federal election). We have recently witnessed one federal government that took its false majority as a licence to ram through profound and destructive changes. A large segment of the Canadian population was vocal in its opposition to these changes, but without a real decision-making voice in the House of Commons that majority segment of the population was unable to prevent the government from proceeding with its radical agenda. That government showed its contempt for democratic process by routinely invoking closure and by hiding profound changes in omnibus bills that did not receive proper parliamentary or media scrutiny. In practice, much of the practical opposition to that government came through legal action in the courts, as government actions were challenged as unconstitutional or as in violation of other legislation.

Benefits of PR

It is unlikely that any party in a parliament elected under PR would achieve a majority. That would be a good thing. Governments would of necessity have to become more responsive and inclusive in order to move forward with their legislative agenda. The views of other parties, and by extension the views of other groups in society, would have to be considered, either by way of coalition government or by a minority government that has to obtain the support of other parties. Canadian values such as dialogue, negotiation, discussion, listening, and consensus-seeking would once again be prominent in parliament. Our national legislature would no longer be a backdrop for the shouting of pre-approved partisan talking points.

The 2015 federal election happily resulted in increased voter turnout. This positive trend can be reinforced by PR, since people will know that their vote will count equally. There are many ridings in Canada (sometimes called "safe" ridings) where it is almost pointless for supporters of losing parties to vote. Those supporters know that their vote will not in any way affect the local or national outcome, and many do not bother to vote, because they know that candidate X of party Y is going to win regardless.

PR will render obsolete the absurd practice of voting strategically in order to prevent a party from winning. People should be able to vote for the party that they support, and not against another party. PR will allow Canadians to vote FOR something, and not AGAINST a party.

Another drawback of FPTP is that it exaggerates regional differences. For example, even when the federal electoral map of Alberta was completely Conservative blue, there were still significant numbers of unrepresented Liberal and NDP supporters in that province. Similarly, the current electoral map of Atlantic Canada looks entirely Liberal red, but in practice there are many Conservative and NDP voters in that region who are now unrepresented. PR will lead a more accurate reflection of regional perspectives.

FPTP also encourages those politicians who are cynically minded to tailor government policy to please the small number of voters in the swing ridings that can give their party a false majority. PR will not reward politicians who take such a cynical approach. Rather, PR will encourage governments to act for all Canadians, and not to take a divide-and-conquer approach to governance.

Recommended forms of PR: MMP and STV

There are multiple options available as to the form of PR that we adopt. There are plusses and minuses to them all, but any of them is better than the status quo. The crucial thing is that we adopt some form of PR. Mixed member proportional representation (MMP) and single transferable vote (STV) are both valid ways of moving forward. I do think it is important that the system adopted will ensure that any party that obtains at least 5% of the popular vote will have commensurate representation in the House of Commons.

Reform not recommended: AV

A proposed reform that is completely unacceptable is the one variously known as ranked ballots or alternative vote (AV). This is still a majoritarian, winner-take-all approach that will if anything lead to larger false majorities. It is clear from the modelling that has been done that the centrist party would benefit the most from ranked ballots/AV, since the centrist party would be the most likely second choice of voters on the left and the right. The introduction ranked ballots/AV would not be a democratic reform, but rather a self-serving action by the centrist party now in power.

Referendum?

Opponents of PR have argued it must be approved by a referendum. We should keep in mind that there were never referenda held to approve previous advances in our democracy, such as dropping the property qualification, adult female suffrage, and extending the federal vote to status First Nations citizens (which amazingly only happened in 1960). Those who demand a referendum now should logically also demand a referendum to validate all those previous advances, and such a referendum would be absurd. If PR is the right thing to do, then we should simply proceed with it. History has taught us that governments tend to hold referenda when they want to be released from promises made (e.g., conscription during the Second World War), or when they want proposed changes to fail (such as the BC and Ontario referenda on PR). Referenda are also open to abuse from powerful elites, who seek to manipulate the snapshot of public opinion on the single day of voting. We have seen this in the recent Brexit referendum, where blatant misinformation was circulated by the winning side.

Conclusion

Democracy is fragile, and cannot be taken for granted. One need only look at the presidential election going on south of the border now to see what can happen when a large segment of society feels excluded and ignored. The electoral procedures that form part of democracy need to be maintained and to evolve, just as society evolves. Canada was once a predominantly rural society with just two major political parties, and community tended to equate with one's geographic location. Today we have a multi-party system, rapid communications and travel, and a largely urban population that is ill served by the nineteenth-century model of single MP ridings based on a winner-take-all electoral formula. It is time for Canada to move on and to adopt PR, which for good reasons is the norm amongst parliamentary democracies around the world.