

A Brief

To the Special Committee
On Electoral Reform

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Reductio ad absurdum is a common form of argument which seeks to demonstrate that a statement is true by showing that a false, untenable, or absurd result follows from its denial, **or in turn to demonstrate that a statement is false by showing that a false, untenable, or absurd result follows from its acceptance.**

To Committee members:

Winston Churchill said “Democracy is the worst form of government, except for all the others.”

And in the CBC series *The Struggle For Democracy*, an Aboriginal Elder from Australia said something along the line that “Democracy would have us believe that 51 half wits know better than 49 people in possession of the facts”. (I couldn’t find the exact quote).

I believe in democracy. But our democracy in Canada is not working in a manner that benefits its citizens to the extent that it should. I fully agree that our first past the post system must be reformed. But what would a reformed electoral system look like?

I’ve read the principles included in the motion that established this Committee and I will address mainly the first three principles. Certainly it goes without saying that voter turnout in this country indicates a lack of confidence in our electoral system and in our government representatives.

I quoted ‘*reductio ad absurdum*’ above to illustrate just how badly our first past the post (FPTP) system can fail to represent the will of the people. If we were to have only two political parties, then every representative elected would have garnered a majority of the votes cast. But let’s say that in every constituency, all the candidates of the same party got a majority of the votes cast. In theory, therefore, it is possible, in a two party system, that one party could win ALL of the seats in parliament with 51% support of those who voted. That’s absurd. And if 60% of the eligible voters cast ballots, the winning party would have 100% of the seats in parliament with the support of only 30.6% of the eligible voters. That’s really absurd.

In Canada we have more than two parties, and our FPTP system has the potential for even more absurd results. There’s no need for me to come up with an example, suffice it to say that a 5% shift in voter support can cause one party to be reduced to minority status while another party gains a resounding majority. (And I’m not referring to the last election.) That’s absurd. But our FPTP system also means that a party can receive a respectable popular vote nationwide and yet fail to elect a single representative. That’s really absurd.

Before I make my recommendation as to what our electoral system should look like, I’d like to say a word about principle 5; local representation. I find it odd that this should even be a principle, given the propensity of our three major political parties to parachute in candidates, especially so-called star candidates.

My suggestion for a revised electoral system has five main points:

1. That there no longer be any constituencies.
2. That votes be cast for a party, not for a person representing that party.
3. That each party would get the same percentage of seats in Parliament as its percentage of the popular vote nationwide.
4. That each party name its representatives from a prepared list of properly vetted candidates, keeping in mind having representation in every part of the country.
5. That half of each party's representatives be female and half be male.

Here's my rationale for a fully proportional electoral system.

1. Because of various factors, constituency boundaries are continuously being redrawn, yet there remains a wide variance in population numbers between constituencies, which invariably brings about tensions over proper representation.
2. Constituencies force all the political parties to field candidates in all constituencies in order to be deemed legitimate even though their candidate often has no chance of winning. Think of all the wasted money and legwork in hopeless causes. My fully proportional electoral system means that every vote counts. No matter where I reside, and even if mine is the only vote cast in my town for a particular party, my vote is counted as part of the nationwide tally.
3. If my party got 35% of the vote nationwide, my party would hold 35% of the seats in Ottawa. If my party got 5% of the vote nationwide, my party would have 5% of the seats in Ottawa.
4. Because candidates would be vetted before hand, there is less chance of rogue characters making a mockery of their party and of our country. And if a loose cannon shows up he/she can be simply dismissed by the party and replaced from the prepared list.
5. Women would be guaranteed equal representation in Parliament.

Here are a number of ramifications in going to a fully proportional system:

1. Canada might never see a majority government again. In my opinion, that would be a good thing. Majority governments are, in reality, four year dictatorships. I don't like dictators. A fully proportional electoral system would demand a higher degree of cooperation and cross party consultation. That's a good thing.
2. There could emerge a number of additional parties. We already have seen the Green Party and Le Bloc Quebecois be formed and there could be more. I envision the possibility of an Indigenous Party coming into being. In my opinion this would be a good thing. If there are sizeable numbers of Canadians who wish to be represented by a party other than the Big Three, they should be given a voice in parliament in line with their numbers nationwide.

There are some aspects to this proposal that would have to be considered:

1. Would we still have a Prime Minister who is a member of the party winning the most seats or would the PM be an all party elected administrator without a seat. The latter approach would eliminate the present system of the PM holding undue power in a democracy.
2. The cost of entry of a political party should be sufficiently onerous in order to prevent parties like the Rhinoceros Party from ever making it onto a ballot. To be on the ballot a party would have to be able to show a minimal nationwide support.
3. How would the representatives be chosen?

In summary, I propose that Canada would be best served by a democracy in which its Parliament fully represents its citizens, by a democracy wherein every vote counts, and by a democracy that is truly inclusive.

I believe that my proposal is one that every citizen could not only easily understand, but could readily see the advantages therein.

Respectfully,

Ray Bernier