

2nd of October 2016

Brief to the Special Committee on Electoral Reform

By Callum McDonald

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Dear Members of the Special Committee on Electoral Reform,

Chers membres du Comité spécial sur la réforme électorale,

The debate over electoral reform is much more fundamental than the people on the news might portray it. The real question is not how a future system might work but how a new system might conceptualise our view of democracy more fully. Other questions, such as those concerning logistics, can only be answered if we agree that it is time for a change. As such, each of the electoral models possesses a different view of democracy on a basic level. I will discuss this with reference to four systems. I am writing this to suggest that the committee **propose Mixed-Member proportional as the system for Canada's next federal election, with a possible referendum after one election has taken place under the new system**, similar to New Zealand.

First-Past-the-Post

The view of democracy espoused by this method is very limited. It holds, basically, that the election is a tool used to transfer absolute power from one major party to another, not as a tool by which citizens may choose who represents them. Large parties must, by FPP, compete in electoral areas and win 51% of the vote there (or whatever percent is the largest).

On the local setting, it is a very tribal view of democracy: the will of my neighbourhood over the will of the adjacent neighbourhood; and, on the smaller scale, the will of the majority of a neighbourhood over the will of the minority in that neighbourhood. It is a democracy that embodies as its core message *victory* and *supremacy*. In this vision of democracy the ultimate goal in the election is to subdue outlying opinions and impose a regional standard. I want *beat* the Green Party so that I can maintain my party's supremacy in the region (as the case is in my riding of Victoria);¹ I want to make it so the 40% who voted for the Green Party are not represented at all. The goal is not to convince anyone of my ideas. It is to actively toss-out those who think differently.

In a national setting, the House of Commons does not represent the amount of people who chose this party or that person to represent them. It shows the opinion of majorities (sometimes majorities as low as 30%) within each electoral district. This is a thoroughly unflattering picture of democracy. The will of the people should, I think, be as representative as it can of said will.

The idea that every person's vote is equal is left by the wayside. Rather, First Past the Post states that every person whose candidate won has an equal vote vote, period. For those millions who voted the wrong way, they become a class apart. It is universal suffrage if your campaign is most successful within an semi-arbitrary geopolitical arena. Suffrage must once and for all be extended to everyone: this time we must give it to those who are a political minority (perhaps a collective minority of 60%) in their region.

¹ "Federal Election Results 2015: Victoria." *Global News* 7 Sept. 2015. Web. 2 Oct. 2016. Link: <http://globalnews.ca/news/2147977/federal-election-2015-victoria-riding/>.

Focusing our lens on the big-picture, we see another problem with the way First Past the Post conceptualises democracy. The insistence on creating political majorities even without a majority of popular consensus is a strange form for a democracy to take. The refusal of the third parties to submit themselves to obscurity and allow twin-party dominance threw a wrench into the idea of actual popular majority, indeed. Now, there is almost never a true majority in Canadian politics. But this is not to democracy's detriment.

The insistence that one party must always have complete rule is a strange one, considering that our allies in Europe, the birthplace of representative democracy, have a totally different view of how this should work. They view parliamentary politics as a game of collaboration not domination. While First-Past-the-Post is anti-coalition, they are pro-domination. First-Past-the-Post and the way it distributes seats is inherently against the forming of a true popular majority, which is why coalition, a true majority, is a dirty word to Canada's governments.

FPP believes in complete rule by one party—without exception. If the system produces otherwise, like the coalition attempt back in the early 2010's, it is malfunctioned according to First-Past-the-Post's spirit, because it does not transfer complete power--and that is more power than have the Presidents of France or the USA—to a single political office (that of the Prime Minister and his cabinet). It is so loathed that even if the people voted that way, governments quash co-operative coalitions, hence we have elections launched to “fix” a minority government situation, instead of capitalizing on it. If one looks at our history books, it has been coalition governments that created old age pensions, the national flag, and many, many more endowments—all because people were forced to work together.

For a process—democracy, the will of the people—to be so attached to the idea of minority rule (although we call it a majority because of seat distribution) is absurd. This brings us to a conclusion: in order to create a system in which everyone in the country can consider themselves represented in a representative chamber, in order to create a system in which our leadership actually represents a majority of citizens (even if someone has to learn to collaborate), we must build a new system. Humans have done this over and over again when a former system does not function justly or productively: it's why we no longer farm using oxen and why we no longer try people as witches by dunking them into rivers.

Mixed-Member Proportional Representation

Fortunately, we don't have to build a system from scratch. We can use a system already tried and tested in a system mirroring our own: proportional representation (as in Westminster-style New Zealand). It is a system which embraces a pluralistic view of democracy.

Mixed member proportional representation has the benefit of local representation and accurate distribution of power in the House of Commons. For the first time, it might be possible to consistently have a government possess a share of seats equal to its share of the vote and for more people's voices to be heard, due to the fact that proportional systems make imperative the need to make and break coalitions.

More coalitions, more representation in one government (and, if you look at Germany, just as much, if not more, stability than we have here in Canada).²

Mixed Member Proportional also has an edge over its fellow systems: it encourages people to truly choose policies they like and express the views they sincerely feel. In the current system, priority is given to parties with localised support and massive engines of electability. It takes only 20,000 odd votes to elect a Liberal member of Parliament but 300,000³ to elect a Green party member of parliament due to no fact other than Geography (ironic considering the geo-centric mission of environmentalism). This will no doubt cause people not to vote for a party they feel will not win (or, worse, that their voting will cause a party they dislike to win). This undercuts the choice of the voter.

In Mixed Member Proportional, anxiety over strategy does not get in between a citizen and their sovereign right to *choose who they want*, not who they are willing to settle for based on geographical constraints or nearby consensus. A Liberal in Calgary should not have to settle for a Conservative to beat and NDP candidate any more than a Green Party member in BC should have to settle for an NDP candidate because they want to beat a Conservative. Proportional representation finally gives *choice* to the electorate, at the expense of crippling strategy. No matter how people vote in a Mixed Member system, the result will take into account how people voted (and therefore what they wanted) not what their geography dictated.

Ranked Balloting and Single-Transferable-Vote

It is this emphasis on choice that puts MMP over its non-First-Past-the-Post brethren. In a STV or Ranked ballot system, the emphasis is not on what the people actually want, but relative popularity. The Ranked system systematically upholds larger parties while discrediting political minorities by literally excluding them through a Game Show-style machination and STV favours centrist parties at the expense of the actual desires of a potentially non-centrist voter (and that goes for either side of the spectrum). It is in the best interests of *all* non-centrist parties to avoid a STV system.

One does not want to replace a ‘fixed’ system that favours the regional majority with a system that favours the norm over the broadly held (but marginalized) positions of many Canadians. Canadians should not have to play a game to have their voice heard in the House of Commons. They should not have to hope others around them feel the same: we do not want to create a system that favours conformity over innovation. This is why STV and RB do not solve the fundamental problem with FFP: they do not encourage full exercise of decision without restraint; the restraint has simply been switched from geographical discrimination to consensus-based discrimination.

² “Angela Merkel.” *Wikipedia*. Wikipedia, 2016. Web. 2 Oct. 2016.

³ From a Speech by Nathan Cullen, Hon. Member for Skeena–Bulkley, B.C. Sept. 2016.

Conclusion

In a Mixed Member system people are free to choose the representative they want. They do not need to fret about geography (FPP), or about whether their opinion will be “removed” during vote-counting because it is a minority in the area or not (RB), or about having to settle for your “second choice” because of the climate of the election (STV). Everyone should have their voice heard in Canada.

There is a transformative aspect to Mixed Member proportional. It encourages people to think for themselves, to participate in democracy actively by potentially creating new pan-Canada parties or by changing the minds of their co-citizens. Canadians’ government should not be chosen by shifting a pool of independents one way or the other every 4 years based largely on geographic trends, and by losing millions of votes by the wayside. Canadians should not simply have to ratify the decisions of parties while having no way to express their true desire for fear of strategically damaging their interests. Canadian politics needs to be made accountable at the lowest point to the wills of the Canadian people and that quest begins if we acknowledge that the problem with our system is not merely logistic but fundamental.

I have discussed the essence of real question behind electoral reform, the downsides First-Past-the-Post with regard to that question, and the relative supremacy of MMP over RB or STV as an alternative.

Let this be the last term where the government of Canada is composed of those representing only a few Canadians from a few choice regions; let the next election be the first election through which Canadians may articulate their true electoral wishes by a near 1:1 representation in the House of Commons and with a zero-tolerance policy regarding the concession of the right to choose and to be represented by your **first-choice candidate or party**. Therefore, **the Special Committee should suggest establishing Mixed-Member Proportional as the system for Canada next federal election and might do so while promising an election *after* one election has taken place with the new system.**

And remember, if the New Zealanders are followed, we can always test the system out first and hold a referendum once people have had the chance to experience both systems. Please just consider that when children refuse to try something for the first time, they are called “childish”; when adults do it, they are called “wise”. It’s time Canada, a baby-nation compared to Europe, ate its spinach.

“I do not like Green Eggs and Ham. I do not like them, Sam I Am.”

-Dr. Zeus, on trying things for the first time, 1960.

Sincerely,

Callum McDonald, age 18, B.C., Canada.

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