

Submission to Committee on Electoral Reform – October 7,2016

A - Summary of Approach being recommended

1 First Past the Post (FPTP) should be replaced. The existing 338 ridings should be replaced by a) creating 238 slightly larger ridings where the winner is chosen using a ranked ballot approach, and by b) appointing 100 additional MP's based on the proportion of first place riding votes each party has received in the 238 ridings. However only parties who have received at least 7-9% of the total vote across Canada would qualify for any of these 100 seats. Those appointed would also have to be unsuccessful riding candidates, or have appeared on publicly displayed party lists. One might also want to require that a minimum (50%?) of the candidates finally chosen by each party for these 100 seats be unsuccessful riding candidates.

2 If there is not some multi party support for such an approach, rather than adding substantially to the proportional component in order to obtain additional party approval, Government should hold a referendum asking voters to support the proposal outlined in 1 above.

B - Problems with existing system and benefits of change

There are two basic problems with FPTP. Firstly even at a riding level the candidate elected is not in many cases the candidate favored by the majority of voters in that riding. Before the past election, the Conservatives for years had benefited from the liberals and NDP, and in some ridings the Greens splitting votes on the Left. And before that the Liberals benefited when Conservative votes were split between the Reform and Progressive Conservatives. And the BQ benefits from having the non-separatist vote split between the Federalist parties.

Changing from FPTP to ranked voting solves this problem, eliminates the need to strategic vote and importantly unlike FTPT ensures that the winner is supported by 50% or more of the voters in the riding. Candidates could still for example vote green, if that was their first priority in a riding where that candidate had no chance of winning, and still affect the result their in their own riding by indicating a second and third choice. Or they could also vote for whomever they considered the best candidate, as well as the party of their choice, if there was a difference.

Another very significant benefit of ranked voting over FPTP is that it would penalize parties who pursue wedge voting tactics, and promote more civility because not only would parties want to appeal to their voters, they would not want to alienate others so that they would never be picked a second choice.

Allowing voters to rank candidates is clearly markedly preferable to FPTP. It is also simple to understand and to implement, since on its own it doesn't even require a change in number of MP's or riding boundaries

Proponents of Proportional Representation (PR) however argue that ranked voting doesn't go far enough and address what they consider a second problem of FPTP in which the winning parties like the 2015 Liberals received a majority in the House with only 39% of the votes, while the proportional approach would link the number of seats a party receives in parliament to the proportion of votes received.

The proposal described in 1 above in which the majority of MP's (238) would be elected under a ranked approach in 238 ridings, and in addition 100 more would be elected based on the proportion of votes received, will narrow the gap between the votes parties with significant support receive, and the seats they hold in parliament.

This element of proportionality would give a party like the greens a few more seats if they could increase the votes cast for it a bit more, (from the current 4-5% to say 7-9% of the vote across the country), and would ameliorate the 1993 catastrophe where the Conservatives got 18% of the vote across the Canada but only 2 seats.

The inclusion of only a small amount of proportionality will avoid a variety of issues that can arise in countries with voting systems that are more proportional where minority governments are the norm, and can be fragile, or where small sometimes ideological or regional parties are rewarded and sometimes given too much power.

It is true that in the proposed system parties who got 40% of the first preference vote could still get more than 50% of the seats, but why is that a significant problem if such a system provides more accountability and stability, and if as proposed, it is a ranked system where every riding member elected would have to receive at least 50% of the overall ranked riding vote to be elected.

It is also important to emphasize again that ranked systems support civility. However unranked systems are more likely to encourage individual parties - be they under FPTP or proportional voting systems - to pursue more combative wedge policies and 'tribal' allegiances.

Given the stresses democracies worldwide are increasingly facing, now is not the time for radical change the impacts of which would be complex and difficult to predict. The consequences of the more limited approach being proposed can be much more accurately predicted and can be extended in years to come if there is a public desire to do so.

C - Rationale for choosing proposed system

Ranked voting is essentially an improved version of FPTP, which ensures that first place is defined as the individual who has the support of a majority of voters, not someone who under FPTP can be someone who may have won with only a third of the vote.

I believe there is real advantage in having a majority of MP's in parliament elected by this improved form of FPTP. It strengthens the riding system and the critical link in representative government between the voters and the individual they elect. And because the majority of MPS would continue to be elected in this fashion, that part of it is very simple and easy for voters to understand and support. And to keep it simple, if voters only want to mark their first preference, and some or none of the rest, that should be their choice.

Given the importance of maintaining this critical link for the majority of MP's, and given that one only wants to introduce a limited amount of proportionality, it was logical then to do this by proposing that 238 MP's be elected in somewhat expanded ridings and 100 MP's be elected on a proportional basis.

I have some interest and knowledge of voting approaches in other countries but am very far from being an expert like many on the electoral reform committee. However given my own limited understanding, provided one wants only to introduce a limited amount of proportionality, I fail to see any advantage in introducing that proportionality at a regional or provincial level and/or by creating larger ridings with multiple MP's as some systems propose.

I have suggested that only parties who receive 7-9% of the vote across Canada be able to take advantage of proportionality. No limit or a very small limit would encourage a plethora of parties, some possibly set up in part to game the system. However the range I suggest may not be appropriate. It is interesting to note that under the proposed system the greens, if they increased their vote somewhat, which they are likely to do with ranked voting, could easily end up with 10 seats. The BQ received 10 seats in the last election. In 6 of these they received 33% or less of the vote; in 3 of these 6 the second place finisher was within 1-2%, and in the other 3 within 5%. So to the extent one can generalize from 2015, a change to ranked voting would very likely diminish the riding seats. However they could more than make that up with the seats allocated proportionately - but only if they could meet the 7-9 % voting requirement.

I have not tried to define how parties might approach deciding how to appoint their share of the 100 members elected proportionally. I have assumed it would be best to leave it largely with the parties to decide how they individually may want to accommodate issues of ethnicity, sex, regional balance, star candidates, accommodate unsuccessful riding candidates etc.

I have tried to explain different approaches to family and friends and have been met with confused stares from individuals who have not given thought to such issues. Significant as it is, there are many issues that are more important to Canadians than electoral reform so there is a real advantage to keeping things as simple and easy to explain as possible unless there is a very good reason for introducing complication.

D - How does one best move forward?

If a number of parties can reach agreement on an electoral system like the one being proposed without conducting a referendum, that is by far the best way forward.

However in order to get multi party approval government might feel it needs to adopt a much less limited PR system than proposed in 1 above. Introducing a more fully proportional system would inevitably involve more complexity and uncertainty making it much more difficult to convince Canadians that the approval of a few parties is sufficient and there is no need for a referendum. And if a referendum was held there would be much greater likelihood the Canadian public would not support such a proposal and we would be left with FPTP.

Therefore if there is not sufficient multi party agreement for the approach outlined in 1 above, Government should present that same proposal to Canadians in a referendum.

E - Another possible approach if a referendum were to be held

In the past I have felt that if there was a referendum 3 choices should be presented. 1 - Stay with first Past the Post (FPTP); 2 - A ranked ballot approach (RB) in all 338 ridings; and 3 - A combination ranked and limited PR approach as I have proposed.

Voters under this scenario, presented with these 3 alternatives, would be required to rank them. Any alternative which received 50% or more of the first ranked vote would be chosen. If none receive 50%, each voter's first **or** second choices for each alternative would be added and the alternative with the highest score chosen. (2nd preference vote should likely be given less weight than the first ranked vote.)

I have not recommended this approach because I believe that as long as the proportional component is simple and limited, as I have proposed, the best way forward is to combine it with a ranked ballot and offer only one alternative to FPTP.

However if there was a decision to present a more significant PR option to the public in a referendum, then I would very much want the much simpler ranked approach presented to the public as well. Not only do I think the ranked approach is better for Canada than a more extensive PR system. I also believe presenting the 3 alternatives and requiring Canadians to rank them, is more likely to result in change from FPTP than offering them a single alternative that is much more proportional, complex, and further removed from what they are used to. And requiring Canadians to also rank the alternatives seems the most logical way of allowing choice between more than 2 alternatives. It is also the approach most likely to lead to change.

Sincerely Brian Buckles

