A proposal to elect the Party Front Benches using Closed-List PR
Submitted to the Special Committee on Electoral Reform ERRE
Steve Nickerson -- October 4, 2016

In *Electoral Systems and Electoral Reform in Canada and Elsewhere: An Overview* (Publication No. 2016-06-E), in the discussion of Mixed Member systems it is listed as a disadvantage that "they create two classes of members (electoral district versus list)".

This ignores the fact that we have always had "two classes of members". They perform distinct functions and both are necessary for an effective democratic government:

- There are the **backbenchers**, who should be people pretty much like us, the electorate. Their function is to take our views and perspectives to Parliament.

- And there are the **frontbenchers** who should be thinking on a national scale. They should be experts and intellectuals who go into politics to offer their special skills in the service of the country.

That we choose the front bench from among whoever happens to get elected seems to me to be inefficient if not absurd. The skills needed to get elected are not at all the same as those needed to formulate good policy.

My proposal is to separate these functions and to elect them separately, using slightly different electoral systems.

One of the main reasons that selecting Cabinet Ministers from among House of Commons members makes no sense is that the party tasked with forming the government cannot be sure that individuals with the necessary expertise will be elected and they cannot court the very best people for these positions because they can't promise them jobs. Such people already have satisfying jobs and will be loath to give them up on the off chance that they might be elected.

The front benches of all parties should be dealing with national issues and long term planning for the whole country. They should be elected nationally and proportionally.[*]

- They should not have to deal with, or be beholden to, a particular constituency or interest group and should not represent a specific riding.

- They should not have to drop everything during an election when they must either neglect the business of government or that of getting reelected.

- They should provide some continuity between Parliaments.

A **Closed-list PR** system based on each party's list of candidates for their front bench would seem to be the best option for this group.

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[*]In fact, **if it seems prudent** to implement PR incrementally, the house could even be left FPTP for a while if there were a pure PR system to elect the executive (I've been flogging this idea since the days when the government was campaigning for an elected Senate).

Several of the other submissions take exception to the idea of party lists. I think this must be due to the perception that the names on these lists will be party hacks whose only function will be to pad out the vote.

This would not be the case with this proposal.
- These lists would be of the party's **top candidates**, including the party leader, and all their other potential Cabinet material. These are people who, under the old system would be given seats by hook or by crook (either by parachuting them into a "safe" riding or by forcing a duly elected representative to resign, triggering a by-election).
- Each party's list should be national in scope and would be published in the run up to an election, becoming a significant component of their election platform.
- Voters would expect these lists to take into consideration issues like gender, age, minority and regional representation as well as experience in the various portfolios of government and would punish the party if they did not measure up.
- Most importantly they would include the very best people a party can recruit.
- Parties having attained at least (x?)% of the popular vote in the previous election would be offered inclusion in this group.

Those elected under this system will form the cabinet, and shadow cabinets of Parliament. Debate among these experts could be expected to be at the highest level and, as no party is likely to hold a majority, some of this expertise could be called upon in the formation of coalitions or or the building of a consensus.

Many of the people on these lists would be incumbent members from the previous Parliament and, as such, they would provide continuity from one election to the next which would help with long term planning and should encourage cooperation and reduce confrontation as they would have to find ways to work together for the long term.

On the other hand I feel the **members of the back bench**, would be better chosen by a slightly different electoral system.

MPs might be described as lobbyists for their constituencies and will have narrower, more regional perspectives to bring to the debate. However a constituency is not the same thing as a riding. I would would define ridings as being land based while constituencies represent something else, or something more:
- Urban – Rural – Expat –
- Language – Gender – Age – Education – Ethnicity –
- Anglophone – Francophone – First Nation – New Immigrant –
- Big Business – Small Business – Agricultural – Service Industries – Skilled Trades –
  - and many combinations of all of the above.

Already our ridings are too big for electors to really "get to know" the candidates[*] so they might as well get bigger still but with **multiple members** so as to represent more of these different "constituencies" giving voters a better chance of finding a kindred spirit to whom they can address their concerns. Ridings should be as large as possible, even Provincial in

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[*] I have never laid eyes on my MP in spite of attending all-candidate meetings. This was a function of FPTP and his assumption (unfortunately true) that his was a "safe" seat.

some cases, encompassing enough seats to encourage candidates with many different views.

A **Ranked Ballot** based on an **Open-List PR** system would seem to be a good way to populate these seats.

- This would provide a much broader group of candidates from which the voter could select their representative(s).
  - Parties could nominate candidates, up to the number of seats assigned to a riding.
  - Small parties and independent candidates could be accommodated under this system, just as they are now.
  - The ridings need not change except that adjacent ridings would be amalgamated and given the same number of seats as the individual ridings had before.
    - This would simplify future adjustments when needed to reflect population changes as an extra member could be added or subtracted without having to adjust riding boundaries.

A Ballot would have two sections:

- The first part would be for the Party you wish to form the Government.
  - Your choice here would add your vote for the party executive list described above and it would direct your per-vote party contribution[*] to the party of your choice.
- The second part would be a list of all the Candidates standing for election in your riding.
  - It would be arranged alphabetically by name followed by (party affiliation) and a vote for an individual candidate could direct a per-vote contribution to that candidate to help defray their campaign expenses.[**]

In its simplest implementation a single mark for a party could suffice for a casual voter.

National Government						
Choose the Party you wish to form the Government						
	Party A		Party B	X Party C	Party D		

Regional Representatives for [??? Riding] [four (4)] members to be elected
Select the candidates you would prefer to represent your riding
numbering them in order of your preference

A Name (party A)		L Name (Independent)	
B Name (party B)		M Name (party D)	
C Name (party B)		N Name (Libertarian)	
D Name (party C)		O Name (Social Credit)	
E Name (party A)		P Name (party C)	
F Name (Communist)		Q Name (party D)	
G Name (party B)		R Name (party D)	
H Name (party D)		S Name (Socialist)	
I Name (party C)		T Name (party B)	
J Name (party A)		U Name (party C)	
K Name (Rhinoceros)		V Name (party A)	

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* A component of our electoral system that urgently needs to be reinstated.
** Your top choices up to the number of seats in the riding (4 in this example)

A more involved voter could go into considerable detail about who they would like to represent their local and regional interests.

National Government							
Choose the Party you wish to form the Government							
	Party A		Party B		Party C	**X** Party D	

Regional Representatives for [??? Riding] (four (4) members to be elected)	
Select the candidates you would prefer to represent your riding	
numbering them in order of your preference	

	A Name (party A)	**8**	L Name (Independent)
	B Name (party B)	**2**	M Name (party D)
	C Name (party B)		N Name (Libertarian)
	D Name (party C)		O Name (Social Credit)
4	E Name (party A)		P Name (party C)
	F Name (Communist)	**5**	Q Name (party D)
	G Name (party B)	**1**	R Name (party D)
3	H Name (party D)	**6**	S Name (Socialist)
	I Name (party C)		T Name (party B)
	J Name (party A)	**7**	U Name (party C)
	K Name (Rhinoceros)		V Name (party A)

The result of this combined approach would be an almost perfectly proportional executive, with the leading party able to form a government, though probably a coalition. Policy would be formulated by a truly expert cabinet that would have to defend their policies before an equally expert opposition, then passing these bills on to a nearly proportional house for debate. Nothing changes except the proportionality, the expertise and (optionally) the need to make more than one mark on the ballot.

Some thoughts on other issues before the committee:

Mandatory Voting – Mandatory with penalties seems like it would be divisive, awkward and expensive (if it was to be enforced). But how about a carrot instead of a stick? A small refundable tax credit would probably bring out the vote and encourage the filling out of tax returns.

On-line Voting – Having on-line polling stations to which voters would log in and identify themselves to a human who would issue a "ballot" would probably work. Once filled in these ballots should be turned into paper and counted with all the other votes cast.

Lowering the Voting Age – Having new voters experience their first election while still in school does seem like a good idea.