

Electoral Reform: Balancing Representation and Good Government

Submitted by William J. Stewart

Thank you for all your efforts in attempting to formulate recommendations that will strengthen the inclusion of all Canadians in the policy process. I share many of the concerns of other Canadians that we have not seen the involvement of sufficient numbers of women, indigenous peoples, youth, seniors, persons with disabilities, new Canadians, and those who reside in rural and remote communities. In a more general sense, I am also concerned that the percentage of those who do vote at all levels in our political system has been consistently low.

My brief focusses on a particular aspect of the discussion around electoral reform. In the public discussions that I have observed, in the information that is sent to me over the internet by some parties and public interest organizations, and in the consultations of the Minister of Democratic Institutions that I have attended, much attention seems to be devoted to alternative electoral systems. Most prominent is reference to various models of Proportional Representation. While that information and discussion is reasonable and useful I find an important element seems to be missing. There is little or no discussion as to how our method of recruiting and electing representatives might impact the effectiveness of our policy-making process. In brief, I am asking the Committee and others to balance their concerns with issues of representation with the needs of making sustainable and effective public policy and good government.

In addition, or perhaps as part of my role as a citizen, I have played a number of roles in the political and policy process as a public servant, policy and program advisor, political party member, campaign manager and volunteer, community and social development organization board member as well as a student of government and politics. I mention these roles because I have experienced the challenges of trying to engage more citizens in the policy process and develop, and just as importantly, implement, good public policy.

Representation and the Policy Process

I am sure you have access to greater expertise on this topic. However, I want to briefly highlight how I see the role of representation and, in specific terms representation in the House of Commons, play out in the development of public policy.

Representation is needed in the policy process, particularly at the political level, to provide ideas to policy-making that are based on experience of a particular geographic, social or even demographic community. Representatives keep policy real and guided by actual needs in our communities. Just as important, with a broad representation of our communities we stand a better chance of interpreting, informing, and educating our communities so implementation of policies are as successful as possible. In addition, a wider representation means increasing the number of possible courses of action that may be possible...this is a the role of innovation and adaptability that diversity can bring to the process. Wide representation enlarges the conversation. However, the primary role of the political process is the formation of policy that will serve Canadians. Somehow, the conversation has to result in sufficient agreement to formulate legislation, and policy and programs that, ideally, will last longer than a particular sitting of Parliament or even a term of government. While some might argue it has always been true, I would suggest that the list of demands that are facing our governments and many others require policy, programs, and supporting legislation that is longer term. In particular, I am thinking of Infrastructure re-building, health care, economic development, support to our Aboriginal communities and, perhaps, the biggest of all – the environment and the challenges of climate change.

The task of enlarging the conversation while getting agreement to move forward in these and other key policy areas is the primary challenge of our political system. It is also the challenge to all who make and consider alteration to the present electoral process.

Our choice to date has been a particular approach that, more or less, has served us quite well. In

brief, representatives are nominated by political parties who develop and share a general agreement on the approach to major policy areas. Using the first past the post election model our representatives are elected from single-member constituencies and the party with the most elected representatives are asked to form the government. The party with the next highest number of elected members forms the Official Opposition, with other parties in the House having the responsibility to recommend other courses of action, challenge government proposals, legislation and administration.

While many would argue the contrary, I would argue that the present model certainly leaves much room for a large 'conversation' on policy. At present there are five broad-based parties that contain members, both elected and not, who contribute to the formulation of their own party policies as well as the conversation in the House. Party members come from a wide variety of Canada's geographic, social, and cultural communities. There are gaps as we have noted above and those need to be addressed. However, it is in the second part of the task of our political system where this model is to be preferred. It helps us in 'getting agreement' to move forward from our conversations to actual policy-making and implementation. By allowing the party with the most members in the House to form a Cabinet of its members and use their majority or plurality of votes to end debate we recognize that the conversation needs to find common ground and has to end at some point - at least in the formulation stage - so that concerted action can be taken and then evaluated. As a means of guaranteeing sufficient agreement to move forward with far reaching or long term policy it is not perfect. Many Parliaments have not been governed by a majority and in these 'minority governments' agreement does not come easy and policy change may be incremental and short term, at best. There have been some policy successes with minority governments such as legislation bringing in the Canada Pension Plan and what is now Employment Insurance but often the minority government sessions are fractious and non-productive. By the same token, a majority government does not guarantee good policy. That majority may not fully represent the views of many Canadians in certain policies and

actions over time and they may be rudely reminded of that in subsequent elections. The positive element of a majority, in terms of the challenge of policy-making, is that it allows the government to make plans and policy based on longer time frames knowing that there will be sufficient support in the House. Working to make their party and parliamentary representation more reflective of Canadian society will add to that policy support. More on that in a moment or two.

The Promise of Proportional Representation

Various models of Proportional Representation propose to address the problems of what is seen as narrow representation and the latter problem, mentioned above, of a majority government that does not seem to represent the prominent views of Canadians. Both are to be addressed through alterations to the electoral process. While there is wide variety in the alternative PR models, for the purpose of discussion here, I will use the simplest concept. Ideally PR proponents would seek to see parties represented in the House based on the number of votes their candidates and parties receive in elections. In that regard we might see a constituency represented by two or more parties in the House. This is intended to increase the chance that more voters will see their particular views represented in the House. This will likely lead to there being more seats in the House and, though not necessarily, more parties in the House. On this latter point it is quite possible and likely, in my view, that if more parties stand a chance of being represented and having a standing in the House more parties will form around specific social and policy interests in order to promote their specific policy interest on an on-going basis. While the Green Party has broadened its policy area it could be seen as an example of a party with a specific policy interest in the environmental policy area that has now found a permanent place in the House. All this is likely to lead to a wider representation and, in terms of my earlier model, a much larger conversation about policy. What we need to know from the proponents of these PR models is how that conversation will be structured in a way that will lead to sustainable, effective policy in those important areas that I have mentioned. How will a government be formed under PR? How will a

cabinet be formed under PR? How will debates be settled and policy formulated? It is one thing to celebrate the concept of broadening our representation. It is another to tell us how we are really going to come to agreement and make legislation and policy on a day-to-day basis. In the absence of clarity around that important matter I can only assume we may see multi-party governments as part of our political and policy-making process. Will that change essentially mean that minority governments will be the norm? Will the necessity of inter-party bargaining mean that policy-making will likely only proceed on an incremental and short-term basis? I am hopeful that it will not, but I have not seen convincing information to the contrary.

What Can Be Done?

While there is much to do to increase access to both the voting process and representation in the House I believe we can make those improvements within the context of our present electoral process. One area where improvements can be made is in the make-up and conduct of our present political parties. While political parties may have various histories of development, essentially they perform an essential part of the policy-making process. They help in the recruitment of potential representatives but, just as importantly, they can provide forums for a wide number of members to bring forward different ideas, and debate and formulate policy programs that have wide agreement before reaching the House. By focussing on widening the representation in their own parties and opportunities for policy development, parties can play a more valuable role in diversifying and aggregating points of view in policy and the political process. By participation in the on-going debate on policy within parties potential candidates are exposed to a wide variety of views and develop the skills that can help them articulate and represent that diversity in the House in a manner that moves debate closer to agreement. By working to increase the diversity of experience and viewpoints within parties candidates and elected members will hopefully reflect a majority not only in number but in substance.

Summary

Electoral reform will have impact not only on representation in the House of Commons but in the formation of government and the policy process. The policy process requires a structure and method of not only bringing forth a wide variety of policy ideas and recommendations but also a method of finding agreement among that diversity that will allow us to make sustainable public policy. Present proposals for moving toward Proportional Representation focus primarily on increasing representation but do not adequately address the need for government decision-making and policy making. As they have in the past, political parties may be able to help to both encourage wider representation in politics and retain their value in aggregating and presenting diverse views in a way that will find the agreement that is needed in the policy process.