

# Results of Electoral Reform Dialogue of September 20, 2016

by Vivian Unger

Three people were involved, including the host (myself) and two guests (Ben and Caroline). I gave a slide-show presentation of the different types of electoral systems, including Stéphane Dion's P3 system and Fair Vote Canada's Urban/Rural Proportional system. Discussions followed.

## *Electoral Systems*

Caroline expressed some concern that a proportional system could lead to decisions taking longer in the House of Commons, due to the need for a number of disparate parties to reach compromise. Yet when we began discussing the relative merits of the different systems, the consensus was that proportional systems were better because they were more fair. Everyone wanted to see more representation of small parties.

Naturally, it was hard for Ben and Caroline to pick a favoured electoral system, since they were both being introduced to these concepts for the first time. But they did manage it, mainly by eliminating the ones they didn't like.

## **Alternative Vote**

Ben claimed that **AV** would not eliminate the need for strategic voting but just necessitate a different type of strategic voting. He pointed out that if someone earned more than 50% of the votes before every other candidate was eliminated and their votes redistributed, then the people who voted for the candidates whose votes were not redistributed, didn't get to decide anything; their votes were wasted. He therefore considered this system no better than **First Past The Post**.

## **List Proportional Representation**

**Largest Remainder List PR** was well received because of how it favoured small parties. All participants agreed that we want to see small parties gain more power.

In contrast, **Highest Average List PR** was rejected because it wasn't as good for the smaller parties.

## **Single Transferable Vote**

**STV** took some time for everyone to understand, but nobody found anything very wrong with it. Ben wanted to know exactly which ballots got redistributed when the quota was reached. I explained that in Ireland it's done randomly; the right number of ballots are just grabbed off the pile. The guests didn't like that. I suggested that the fairest, most non-random thing to do would be to recount ALL the ballots that voted for that candidate, looking at the second choices, and then multiply those numbers by whatever ratio was appropriate: for example, if the number of votes over the quota was 30% of the whole, then multiply the second-place votes for each of the remaining candidates by .3 and add that amount to their totals. A computer algorithm could be developed to do this. The guests liked that idea, though Ben was concerned about the potential for hacking.

## **Mixed Member Proportional**

**MMP** was not met with favour. The guests found it next to incomprehensible. Eventually we achieved some

clarity, at which point Ben declared that only people who voted for the local MP got local representation, and that wasn't fair, because the list candidates wouldn't care about you and your region. Caroline seemed to agree. I thought that **MMP** would be an improvement over **FPTP**, but didn't like the obstacles it would throw in the way of independents (who presumably wouldn't be able to earn a list seat).

### **P3 (Proportional, Preferential, Personalized)**

Both Ben and Caroline disliked **Stéphane Dion's P3** system, finding it confusing. Our understanding is that in the second half of the ballot, where you vote for actual candidates, you can only vote for candidates put forward by the party that you ranked number 1 in the first part of the ballot. Both guests thought that voters should be able to vote for their favourite candidate regardless of their party affiliation.

I saw their point but thought that **P3** has potential—perhaps with a bit of tweaking. A sticking point for me is Dion's statement that the territories would get only one MP each, because they are too large to expand and low in population. So after years of oppression and a lack of political power, our First Nations are to be denied PR while the rest of the country gets it? I can't endorse that, and I don't see a problem with giving the territories at least two MPs each. Consider it corrective action.

### **Fair Vote Canada's Rural-Urban Proportional**

Caroline disliked **Rural-Urban Proportional**. She didn't like the idea of a division between urban and rural. She said people need to understand that rural problems are urban problems as well. I said that I thought the intention was just to prevent rural ridings from getting too big, and Caroline declared it should have a different name then. Ben said it was unfair to people in rural areas, who would only have a local representative if they'd voted for the winner. It was similar to his complaint about **MMP**.

### **Other Possible Systems**

Caroline suggested an alternative non-voting system where ordinary citizens would be selected as representatives by lottery. This was not much discussed, probably because we didn't think the ER committee would go for that.

### **Electoral Systems: Conclusion**

Ultimately, **Largest Remainder List PR** and **STV** turned out to be the most popular of the proposed electoral systems. I pointed out that though **List PR** is generally thought of as a country-wide system, not a system of local constituencies, there's no reason that it can't be adapted to be local. Each party could put forward not just one list but several, one for each riding, consisting of candidates local to the area. **Largest Remainder** could be used within each riding to assign the riding seats to the winning candidates.

### *Other Issues*

Everyone expressed concern with the idea of **online voting**—security issues, the lack of paper trail, the possibility of a power outage or server crash at an importune time, and the dangers of system hacking. Ben thought the risks could be managed with redundancy. I suggested that a system such as the one used for municipal elections, where the computer-readable ballot is fed into a machine, would be advantageous for quick counting, especially for **STV**, and would provide a paper trail. This would not of course provide the convenience of online voting. Ben declared that a paper trail is pointless when your counting is done by computers; if something went wrong with the voting process, the whole election would have to be redone.

The idea of **mandatory voting** was not popular. Both guests thought that citizens should be persuaded to vote rather than forced, through a proportional system that would make citizens feel as if their vote actually counted. I thought that mandatory voting would be acceptable only if **proportional representation** was implemented. All agreed that compelling voters to vote in a subpar system would only lead to resentment and a rise in "joke" votes (à la Rhinoceros party) and spoiled ballots.

### *Recommendations*

- Replace FPTP with some sort of proportional system, one that is fair to the First Nations, people living in rural areas, and independent candidates. Largest Remainder List PR and STV are preferred.
- Approach online voting with caution and consider the risks involved, such as hacking and data loss.
- A mandatory voting law should be considered only if a proportional system is introduced. Ideally, citizens should be persuaded to vote via a fair system, rather than forced by law.