

Brief to the Special Committee on Electoral Reform (ERRE)
By Wayne Smith
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1) Effectiveness and legitimacy: that the proposed measure would increase public confidence among Canadians that their democratic will, as expressed by their votes, will be fairly translated and that the proposed measure reduces distortion and strengthens the link between voter intention and the election of representatives;

The overriding principle for designing a fair voting system must be proportional representation (PR).

The Prime Minister has promised us a voting system that will "Make every vote count." This is the very definition of proportional representation.

Yes, the term implies that a party receiving 40% of the votes will win 40% of the seats in Parliament (and not 60%), while a party receiving 10% of the votes will win 10% of the seats, (instead of diddly squat). But this is a symptom, not the disease. This is not about fairness to political parties.

A fair voting system is one that is fair to voters. A fair voting system is one that allows us to choose our representatives (and we are ALL entitled to representation). A fair voting system is one that GIVES VOTERS THE POWER to hold politicians and political parties accountable. A fair vote is a vote that makes a difference. A fair vote is a vote that actually helps to elect someone. And that's called proportional representation.

Under the current system (let's call it FPTP), most of us vote for candidates who are not elected, so most of us are "represented" by people we voted against. And most MPs represent mostly people who voted against them. When you think about it, it's a screwy system.

The reason for this is the purely arbitrary restriction of only one MP being elected in each riding.

I know that all of you will insist that "I represent all my constituents," and I know most of you do your best to give good service to all your constituents. I know that if I have a problem with my passport or some such issue, my MP will do her best to help me out.

But when it comes time to stand up in Parliament and vote, you can't vote both ways. So which of your constituents will you stand up for -- the 40% who voted for you, or the 60% who voted against you?

Under the current system, 45-50% of us vote for people who get elected. Under any decent proportional system, 90-95% of us will be represented by someone we actually voted for.

2) Engagement: that the proposed measure would encourage voting and participation in the democratic process, foster greater civility and collaboration in politics, enhance social cohesion and offer opportunities for inclusion of underrepresented groups in the political

process;

It is clear from the work of Arend Lijphart and others that proportional representation fosters a more consensual type of government and a more civilized style of politics. Countries with proportional voting systems have (in general and on average) higher voter turnout and greater citizen satisfaction with government and government policies, politics and politicians.

It is also clear that our current, winner-take-all system throws up barriers to the election of women and minorities. Any candidate who is "different" in any way finds it hard to get nominated because of the incentives built into the system. Proportional systems require parties to put forward a slate or a list of candidates, which incentivizes a different strategy -- "Something for everyone."

Canadian political parties have been trying, in good faith, to increase the number of women in our parliament for decades, and yet we are stuck at about 26%, below the accepted level of critical mass, and an embarrassing 60th place in the world. It cannot be pointed out too often that EVERY DEMOCRACY THAT ELECTS 30% WOMEN USES A PROPORTIONAL VOTING SYSTEM.

3) Accessibility and inclusiveness: that the proposed measure would avoid undue complexity in the voting process, while respecting the other principles, and that it would support access by all eligible voters regardless of physical or social condition;

I am always astonished when critics bring up the supposed complexity of proportional voting systems. Since most developed countries have been using proportional voting systems for most of the last century, what they are really saying is, "Yes, the Irish, the Scots, the Australians, the New Zealanders, the Norwegians, the Swedes, the Danes, the Dutch, the Germans, etc., etc., can figure out how to use proportional voting systems, but Canadians are just too stupid to deal with a fair voting system." Well, I don't think Canadians are too stupid. Do you?

Here's the entire level of complexity from the point of view of the voter: Instead of putting an "X" beside the name of one candidate on the ballot, you have to a) put an "X" beside a candidate and another "X" beside the name of a political party, or b) put a "1" beside the name of your favourite candidate, a "2" beside your second preference, a "3" beside your third preference, and so on. I think Canadians can deal with that level of complexity.

Note that proportional representation and a ranked ballot are two separate issues. We can have PR with or without a ranked ballot, and we can have a ranked ballot with or without PR.

If we just add a ranked ballot to our current, single-member ridings (Alternative Vote, AV), we have done little or nothing to improve our voting system, or perhaps made it worse. With a single MP elected in each riding, we still have a winner-take-all system. Indeed, the same people will be elected in 95% or more of the ridings. The elimination of vote splitting can actually reduce proportionality. While third parties may get a few more votes, they won't likely elect any more MPs.

The Alternative Vote will do nothing to promote diversity or increase voter choice, as can be

seen in Australia, the only major country that uses this system, where the same voters, on the same day, elect lots of women and a diversity of candidates from multiple parties in their proportional Senate, while electing 24% women and a lot of old white guys from 2.5 parties in their AV House of Commons. (Don't get me wrong, I'm an old white guy myself.)

Plus, the Alternative Vote has been thoroughly discredited in Canada as a partisan system that would tend to favour Liberals (which may or may not be true in the long term). Any attempt by the Government to push through such a system would be seen as self-serving, and would not gain cross-party support.

4) Integrity: that the proposed measure can be implemented while safeguarding public trust in the election process, by ensuring reliable and verifiable results obtained through an effective and objective process that is secure and preserves vote secrecy for individual Canadians;

Of course, the method of calculating the winning candidates is more complicated under proportional systems, but the voter doesn't have to worry about that, any more than they have to understand electronic fuel injection to drive a car. What is essential is that the process be transparent and reproducible, so that journalists, academics, Opposition MPs, and whoever else is interested can see how the results were tabulated and the winners arrived at. That's not a problem with any of the well established proportional voting systems in use around the world. We can still use paper ballots, and we can still do recounts.

I have conducted numerous Single Transferable Vote elections for small groups, using paper ballots and readily available online software (Opavote.org). With the help of a volunteer, I can input a couple of hundred votes into the computer in 45 minutes and have the results by the end of the meeting.

On the topic of electronic voting, it seems we should be able to do it, and it would be great for voters with limited mobility, but I am very concerned about the inevitability of hacking.

Lowering the voting age: Sure, why not.

Mandatory voting: Don't have a problem with it, but I don't think it will solve any problems. If you want people to vote, give them a vote that counts.

5) Local representation: that the proposed measure would ensure accountability and recognize the value that Canadians attach to community, to Members of Parliament understanding local conditions and advancing local needs at the national level, and to having access to Members of Parliament to facilitate resolution of their concerns and participation in the democratic process;

There is zero accountability when the outcome of the election does not match the way we voted, which it never does under the current system.

A hundred years ago, the modern political party evolved as a machine for electing people. Since then, it has been almost impossible to get elected without the support of a party organization. Emerging democracies in Europe realized that power was increasingly

centralized, that the individual MP was becoming irrelevant, and that more and more power was held by party elites. They realized that they needed a mechanism to hold political parties accountable, and so they invented proportional voting systems.

The notion that proportional voting systems somehow give extra power to political parties is nonsensical. The opposite is true. Proportional voting was invented to give voters the power to hold political parties accountable.

Both MMP and STV allow voters to vote directly for candidates. Both MMP and STV would make it easier for independent candidates to be elected, and would increase the independence of ordinary MPs.

The notion that there is a tradeoff between proportionality and local representation is utterly false.

As noted above, most of us are "represented" by someone we voted against. What kind of local representation is that? So much for the sacred bond between voter and MP.

A look at the countries that use proportional voting systems will show that proportional representation actually gives excellent local representation, even in a pure list system.

It's important to understand that, even if elected from a provincial list, everybody comes from somewhere, and every MP is a "local" MP somewhere. And people like to vote for people they know, so parties creating lists make sure they have candidates from every part of the region. The ones that get elected on the lists are the ones that didn't get elected in the ridings, so every region has MPs from every party.

It's also important to understand that the list MPs are riding MPs in waiting. The riding seats are the safe seats. And the government still goes to the party that wins the most ridings. The list seats are a consolation prize for the losers. So in Germany and New Zealand, the list MPs have constituency offices and provide the same services as the riding MPs. The voters mostly don't even know which MPs are riding MPs and which are list members -- they're all just MPs.

With PR, you don't lose your local MP -- you have a local MP from every party, one of whom is probably the person you voted for!

But FPTP is positively toxic for regional representation. By rewarding parties whose voters are concentrated (Reform, BQ) over parties whose voters are spread out across the country (NDP, Green), FPTP provides incentives to put regional concerns ahead of the national interest.

The previous government held zero seats in Toronto, Montreal, and Vancouver. How was this good for the nation?

For decades, FPTP allowed the Bloc Quebecois to win more seats than the NDP with half the votes, holding the balance of power in all our minority governments, and actually becoming the Official Opposition in 1993 although they were the fourth-place party in terms of votes.

When the National Energy Policy was enacted, the Government held exactly two seats west

of Ontario. A few more western voices at the table may have made a big difference in the nature of this policy and how it was implemented, and avoided a national crisis that still rankles decades later. Even Stephen Harper supported proportional representation in 1996, when the right was divided and the West Wanted In.

Under a proportional voting system, every major party would hold seats in every region of the country, and every region would be represented in both the Government and the Opposition.

So what kind of voting system would I like to see in Canada?

Any proportional system would be vastly better than any majoritarian system, and I would support any proposal that was sufficiently proportional.

While I have no objection to a straight list system, either MMP or STV would allow us to directly elect our MPs, which is what Canadians are used to.

A question that interests me more, but is little discussed, is "What should a riding look like?"

I believe that an electoral district should comprise an actual geographic community of interest.

The arbitrary restriction of one MP per riding makes it impossible to maintain the equality of the vote between urban and rural/remote ridings. Our cities are under-represented, but still our rural ridings are under-serviced.

It also makes it difficult for riding boundaries to make sense in terms of real geographic communities.

With proportional representation, every vote counts, no matter where you vote or how you vote, so the weight of your vote is no longer determined by the size or shape of your riding.

This means riding boundaries can be put wherever they make sense. It no longer matters so much that one MP represents a small number of people spread over a large area, while another represents a large number of people who live close together.

So we can actually make rural and remote ridings smaller without disadvantaging urban voters.

It should be pointed out as well that the urban ridings tend to be more diverse than rural and remote ridings. It is in our cities where newcomers first settle. So under-representing our cities also means under-representing our minorities. This is not a small problem.

I believe it makes sense that a city should be a multi-member riding. These MPs could be elected by STV or by an open list system.

Ottawa is currently six ridings, each of which elects one MP. But if Ottawa were a single riding that elects six MPs using a proportional voting system, those MPs would better reflect the way people voted, and almost everyone in Ottawa would have an MP that they actually voted for.

Similarly, Hamilton could be a single riding electing five MPs, London could be a single riding electing four MPs, and Windsor could be a single riding electing three MPs.

Can Toronto be a riding that elects 23 MPs? Possibly, but it might make more sense to split Toronto into four ridings that each elects six or seven MPs. That would avoid an unwieldy ballot, while acknowledging that the residents of Scarborough do indeed have a different perspective than people living downtown.

Rural and remote ridings are already too large, and could remain single-member ridings. But rural voters need fair voting too, so we would need regional or provincial top-up lists.

But the fact that we have a certain degree of proportionality in the multi-member urban ridings means that instead of having 40-50% list members, we could get by with 10-20% list members.

Systems like this have been discussed by former Chief Electoral Officer Jean-Pierre Kingsley, and a similar model called Rural Urban Proportional Representation has been developed by Fair Vote Canada (along with an STV and an MMP model): http://www.fairvote.ca/fvc-erre-submissions_appx_12_-rural-urban_pr/

Members of the committee may also want to look at my submission to the Ontario Citizens' Assembly on Electoral Reform: <http://wayneon.ca/democracy/PRSimulator/simulator.html>

In conclusion, I would like to thank the members of the committee and the Minister and Parliamentary Secretary for all the work you are doing on this vital but complex issue, and the Prime Minister for his courageous promise to Make Every Vote Count.

Oh, and one more thing. Do not, under any circumstances, submit this question to a referendum.

I used to advocate for a referendum on electoral reform. Then I got to participate in a couple, and found out what referendums are all about.

A referendum is a winner-take-all process that divides us into winners and losers, and that's the problem we are trying to solve.

Referendums bring out the worst in divisive, partisan politics. We will be bombarded with misleading information and outright lies, which the average voter will have no way of evaluating. A referendum never turns out to be about the question on the ballot.

Referendums don't solve anything. They just postpone the question and leave everyone with a sour taste in their mouth.

The reason we wanted a referendum was so citizens could force politicians to act. Now that we have a government committed to reform, the only reason for a referendum is to ensure that no reform happens.

The Prime Minister was quite clear in his election promise. The next election is to be held under a new voting system, one that will "Make every vote count." He has not only a mandate, but an obligation, to change the voting system.

As we say in Canada, "Git 'er done!"

Wayne Smith