

## **11:59 Special. Read this Paper! Voting reform must be understood in the context of democratic evolution**

Here is my submission regarding voting reform. My name is Tim Rourke. I live in Toronto and come originally from Alberta. I have a degree in Political Science from the University of Toronto. I live on a disability pension and have for most of my life. This gives me some time to be involved in voting reform organizing, and with democratic reform more generally.

I worked with Fair Vote Canada for some years. I attended most sessions of the Ontario Citizen's Assembly as an observer. I have been involved with the much studied participatory budgeting process within the Toronto Community Housing Corporation, the city's social housing arm. It seems to me that voting reform in Canada must be understood within the context of the long process of developing and deepening democracy all over the world.

### **Modernizing**

I think most of the problem with Canada is with obsolete institutions which have never been updated since colonial times. Fixing the voting system would be only a first step to a more thorough overhaul of government. Moving to a more consensual legislature like most other advanced countries did long ago would make it easier to begin reforming other aspects of government. It will be harder for interest groups who simply do not like democracy to obstruct public initiatives.

As a democracy deepens it goes from a representational model to a deliberative one. That is, one that is both direct and participatory; in which the public participates in discussing and forming policy and then votes on measures directly. There is also the concept of a delegative democracy, whereby local assemblies in which everyone participates select delegates, not representatives, to higher ones, which might then choose delegates to yet higher ones. As opposed to a representative, a delegate is directly responsible to the body which points her and serves at its pleasure. This eliminates most of the problems with electoral and partisan politics.

A delegative system is found in a few places where the public really got a chance to set up their own system; it seems instinctive to people. In places where democracy is well advanced, referenda and various forms of public consultation are commonly used. There is a science to conducting proper referenda and they are hard to do where strong party politics and privately controlled media try to manage public perceptions.

### **Process**

There are many forms of citizen consultation, some genuine and some bogus. They are called Citizen's Assemblies, Citizen's Juries, Planning Circles, Participatory Budgeting, etc. The basic idea is to choose some level headed people by a random process and let them listen to experts on a matter, debate among themselves, usually with the help of a professional facilitator, and reach a decision. It may be an allocation of limited budget resources, the formulation of a referendum question, or a decision on an administrative matter.

There is no really good process of deciding the voting reform issue that would not involve some form of participatory democracy. A referendum question would need to be formulated by some

form of Citizen's Assembly. Parliament just deciding on its own would smell of a conflict of interest. The result would lack validity and thus be open to being undone by the next parliament. It has been wisely said that the voting system belongs to the people, not to the parliament. Thus it needs to be legitimized by some consultative process which is seen as valid and fair.

Among the problems we are facing with this voting reform process is that Canada does not have much experience at real democracy. We do not know how to go about things like referenda and Citizen's Assemblies. We have also got ourselves stuck in this severe time constraint. It seems to be that the way out of this would be to do the best public consultation possible given these limitations, come out with the best solution within the constraints, and go with it. But, mandate a consultation and referendum on it after two elections.

However, it should be possible to do a decent Citizen's Assembly within the time frame, about a year. We do have some experience at it, in Ontario and B.C. In both cases, they were done rather well but partisan politics deliberately sabotaged them at the end. The objections raised to a CA, that it would be hugely expensive, or that there is no way to select or manage such a large group of people, are not serious. All these problems could be overcome within the time needed with a bit of common sense and a willingness of politicians to give it a chance to work.

And of course, a CA would cost some money. If it is expensive, then expensive compared to what exactly? Democracy is always too expensive for people who do not really accept democracy.

Senator Axworthy has proposed a CA. The electoral reform committee has heard from Professor Thomson, who very ably led the Ontario Citizen's Assembly. I attended most sessions of the Ontario CA as an observer and was impressed by it. Below are my own thoughts about how a federal CA could work.

### **suggestion**

The CA should be 100 people, half of each gender of course. Google tells me that 22 would be francophone, 4 aboriginal, and 21 immigrants. We can only go so far with getting a "representative" Canadian population, or we will end up with something like the genius ideas on the Fair Vote Canada discussion boards, like having to find someone who is one quarter of a transgendered person. The group should also be roughly proportional to geographic areas, for example 18 from the Prairies.

These people could be found through jury rolls and a selection committee. It would not be all that hard. The problem would be in getting 100 people who can commit for two months and could travel to Ottawa. The Ontario assembly met on weekends. People were flown or bussed, some from the far reaches of the province, put up in hotels and flown back Sunday evening.

A better solution might be to bring them to Ottawa for a solid month and pay them their usual incomes while they are there. Then you bring the usual experts to them. If the logistics of shipping them around the country is too much the public consultations could be done by teleconference. You then finally let them come to a decision with the help of professional facilitators.

So the problems of a Citizen's Assembly are not all that great. They should be surmountable by an entity with the resources of the federal government. There will have to be the will to face down the yowling of the conservative party. The other parties must agree to pass whatever the assembly comes up with, and abide by it.

### **Urban-rural model**

To conclude, as to the type of voting reform I would like to see, I am impressed by the model developed by the former Chief Electoral Officer of Canada, J.P. Kingsley. It seems to me to be the best compromise between the realities of Canada and the needs for a collaborative legislature.

Some will complain that it is not fully proportional. There is no way to have enough "overhang" or compensational seats given the set number of seats each province can have. But the idea of strict proportionality comes from the "Mathematicians" who have controlled Fair Vote Canada in Past.

What is really important in voting reform is to have multi member constituencies. Single member constituencies are very undemocratic and are what is really wrong with our present system. One person cannot "represent" an entire district; that is absurd. Mutlimember districts create some competition between representatives which reduces opportunity for abuse and corruption. It gives many more people a representative whom they actually voted for.

Finally, it seems to me that the process of voting reform is itself a learning process. Canada is not really very democratic. Its institutions are frozen in the colonial age. We are starting to run up against this inability to manage reform, and in a grievous way. In learning how to fix the voting system, we create the knowledge by which further citizen driven reforms become possible, including ones which require constitutional amendment.

It is said that the most dangerous idea to democracy is that we already have one. Let us go on with establishing and developing our democracy in Canada.