

Report on a Meeting Held in Brandon Manitoba on September 14'th 2016

Dr. M. Susan Roddy

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Abstract

The Brandon and Westman chapter of the Council of Canadians hosted a public meeting on Proportional Representation at Brandon University on the evening of September 14'th 2016. This document is a report on that meeting.

1 Introduction

The ERRE committee will be holding public consultation in Winnipeg on September 20'th. The Council of Canadians, abbreviated CoC, has been a consistent advocate of Proportional Representation, abbreviated PR, for some time now. At the monthly meeting of our chapter of the CoC in early August we decided to hold a meeting to coincide with the ERRE's visit to our Province. This meeting was the result of that decision. We hope that the committee will receive this report while they are still in Manitoba, or at least consider it in the spirit of being here.

The meeting was held in the Elephant Room in the Knowles-Douglas Students' Union Center at the university. The event was advertised as a Town Hall style meeting. The event started at 6:30 pm with an informal meet and greet session. At 7 pm a twenty five minute introductory presentation on PR was given. This was followed by short presentations on various aspects of PR given by the other three panelists. Following the presentations the panel took questions and comments from the audience. The capacity of the

room, in the configuration we used, is about fifty. The room was very close to capacity.

CoC is a non-partisan group, therefore we did not invite any prominent local political figures to participate on the panel. However, we did advertise widely and would have welcomed any as audience members had they chosen to attend. None did.

While there is probably little that is new to the committee here, it is my hope that the committee will find this report interesting for several reasons. First and foremost because it was hosted by a non-partisan group. Secondly, we had a knowledgeable and youthful panel. Thirdly, we had a reasonably diverse, interested and interesting audience. Finally, because this small event was conducted in an informal, collegial and yet spirited manner.

I want to make it clear that this report has been prepared by me without extensive collaboration from other members of our chapter, or members of the panel. This is not something we wanted, we were simply faced with a tight deadline. Small parts of the report are only factual insofar as they are my recollection of the evening. However, the event was video recorded on my computer, and I have the completed surveys.

2 The presentations and the panel

The moderator for the event was Dr. Scott Blyth, Chairperson of the Brandon and Westman chapter of the Council of Canadians. Dr. Blyth began with introductory remarks. As mentioned above, the presentations consisted of a 25 minute introductory presentation on PR followed by three shorter, more specialized presentations of about ten minutes each.

The introductory presentation on PR, entitled PR 101, was given by Evan Krosney. Evan is the regional captain for Fair Vote Manitoba.

The first of the shorter presentations was given by Dr. Allison McCulloch. Dr. McCulloch is a Political Science and Gender Studies Professor at Brandon University who has done extensive research on PR. The main focus of her presentation was on the benefits of PR for women and minorities.

Michael Barkman, Chairperson of the Manitoba chapter of the Canadian Federation of Students followed. Michael focussed on PR and younger people,

especially students. In particular, he argued that adopting PR would increase the participation of young people in the political arena.

Brigette DePape, the Prairies Regional Organizer with the Council of Canadians, was the final presenter. Brigette focussed on some of the problems inherent in majoritarian systems.

The presentations were excellent and were well received by the audience.

3 The question period

The audience's range of age was fairly uniform, ranging from first year university students to people in their eighties. Racial minorities and Indigenous people were well represented. Three people had traveled from the Boissevin area for the event and I think there were others who had traveled from closer rural communities. The LGBT community was well represented and the gender split was very close to fifty-fifty. We were pleased by the diverse nature of our audience. We were also delighted that Dr. Gervan Fearon, the President of Brandon University, chose to attend.

The questions and comments from the audience were also diverse. The question period went on for over an hour. It was polite and respectful. As with any such gathering there were a few people who went on and on or were completely off topic. The questions and comments were mostly really good and were handled well by the panel. Here are, what I feel were, the three most dominant themes:

- There was the usual confusion caused by the different ways of implementing some reasonable form of PR. The panel did a good job of pointing out that the details are not as important as the result; which is to have the allocation of seats in Parliament better reflect how we vote proportionally across the nation.
- Another important concern raised by an audience member was that they would lose local representation in Ottawa under PR. The panel pointed out that this only becomes a real issue if ridings became very large (someone mentioned Manitoba becoming a single riding, for example) and that this is unlikely to happen with any of the models that are

under serious consideration. Someone commented, an audience member I believe, that the quality of personal local representation might improve significantly for some individuals, for personal or partisan reasons for example, if a riding is represented by more than one MP.

- The perception that PR leads to instability was also floated by audience members. The panel acknowledged that PR is more likely to lead to minority or coalition governments but argued that these are intrinsically no less stable than governments elected under our present system. They provided statistics from other countries to back this argument up. A panelist pointed out that it is our present adversarial style of governance that causes minority governments in our system to fail and that, in PR systems, collaboration and consensus tend to become the norm quite quickly.

There were other interesting questions and comments, but there is neither the time nor enough room here to record all of them. After the question period many people left but some stayed to further discuss things and to socialize for a little while. Throughout the evening everyone was polite and well natured. Everyone deserves credit for this but extra thanks should go to our moderator, Dr. Blyth.

4 The survey; comments

Towards the end of the presentations we distributed a one page survey to everyone in the audience and encouraged everyone to write any comments they had on the back of it. There were not as many comments as I had hoped there would be. Of the forty two surveys handed in, only twelve had written comments on them. These are summarized below. I have not transcribed the comments verbatim but have tried to capture the essence of each person's points in as short a form as possible. I have made a real effort to be unbiased in this regard. However, I have omitted comments that seem to me to be irrelevant or inappropriate.

- It is hard to assimilate so much information so quickly. However, my sense of PR is very positive. I encourage education for all Canadians.

- It is disappointing that the perspective was so focussed on youth and the presenters are all young, since so many in the audience were seniors. I was disappointed by the criticism of former Prime Minister, Stephen Harper, and his government¹. This is the first time I have heard of any of this (PR), we definitely need more information.
- With reference to criticisms of a two party system; the USA seems to have done quite well. The reason youth are not active politically is simply apathy. I have always voted and just accepted the outcome, win or lose.
- I am not sure how PR will work in practice or how we will choose a Prime Minister. I would like to keep local representation.
- ² I was an International student and am now a citizen. I am also a member of a visible minority. I was not allowed to vote until I became a citizen. Even once I had committed to stay in Canada, I had no say on my elected candidates, but the decisions they make impact me.
- Excellent presentations. Something to build on. Excellent reference to good work done by the CCF in a minority government situation. This discussion engaged the oldest down to the youngest.
- I am concerned that the ERRE will not be able to see past partisan issues of self interest. In the end it is all Canadians, independent of political or ideological affiliation, who should be represented in Parliament. The only way to achieve this is through a true proportional system. The ranked ballot is fundamentally not proportional and should not be an option. I support a mixed member proportional two vote system; one for candidate, one for party.
- It's time for real democracy.
- Make every vote count! PR eliminates 'policy lurch' and results in societies with less economic inequality.

¹I agree that some of the panelists could have been more circumspect in their comments about Mr. Harper. However, I believe that criticisms of his governments' policies were made to illustrate the perils of majoritarian systems and not for partisan reasons.

²This comment isn't totally relevant but I thought people would find it interesting.

- I prefer the two vote system of PR; a candidate vote and a party vote.
- It seems the major parties and the press are fully engaged in trying to keep the public from understanding PR. Why is this?
- I support any variation that would increase the participation of students, aboriginal people, minorities and women.

5 The survey; quantitative data

In this section I summarize the quantitative data from the survey. A blank copy of the survey is on the following (unnumbered) page.

The survey was adapted from a Fair Vote Canada survey by Evan Krosney. My thanks to Evan and Marcel Roberge for recording and organizing the data from the individual surveys, and for help with this document.

Questions 1 to 5 and 7 have similar formats. For each of these I summarize the question. I give one or two keywords for each option in order to keep the format compact.

The tallies do not all add up to 42 because some people left some parts blank.

Question 1. How fair do you believe Canada's existing system is?

Option	very	somewhat	unfair	very unfair	unsure
Tally	1	4	13	23	0
%	2	10	31	55	0

Question 2. How fair do you believe winner take all ranked balloting systems are?

Option	very	somewhat	unfair	very unfair	unsure
Tally	1	5	12	23	1
%	2	12	29	55	2

Question 3. Ranked balloting systems generally produces majority governments. How do you feel about this?

Electoral Reform Survey



Council of Canadians



Fair Vote Manitoba

1. How fair do you believe Canada's existing first-past-the-post voting system is? (Circle a, b, c, d or e)
 - a) Very fair
 - b) Somewhat fair
 - c) Not very fair
 - d) Not fair at all
 - e) Unsure
2. How fair do you believe winner take all ranked ballot voting systems are? (Circle a, b, c, d or e)
 - a) Very fair
 - b) Somewhat fair
 - c) Not very fair
 - d) Not fair at all
 - e) Unsure
3. Winner take all ranked ballot voting systems generally produce majority governments similar to our current system. What statement below best summarizes your feelings on this? (Circle a, b, c, d, e or f)
 - a) This is profoundly undemocratic. The share of seats a party gets should be equal to their share of first preference votes.
 - b) This is problematic because it gives an unfair amount of power to winning parties and allows their power to go unchecked, while suppressing smaller parties.
 - c) This is simply a reality of ranked ballot systems, and it is neither a good nor a bad thing.
 - d) This is a good thing because it allows majority governments to be formed easily.
 - e) This is democratic because it allows voters to rank choices without having to worry about "splitting" the vote, even if their first preference is not elected.
 - f) Unsure
4. How fair do you believe proportional representation voting systems are? (Circle a, b, c, d or e)
 - a) Very fair
 - b) Somewhat fair
 - c) Not very fair
 - d) Not fair at all
 - e) Unsure
5. Proportional representation voting systems generally produce minority and coalition governments, as parties require to receive a majority share of the vote to form a majority government. What statement below best summarizes your feelings on this? (Circle a, b, c, d, e, or f)
 - a) This is profoundly undemocratic. Governments should be formed based only on how many MPs are elected from different constituencies. A party's overall vote share should not matter.
 - b) This is a problematic because minority and coalition governments tend to be less stable, meaning elections may be held more often.
 - c) This is simply a reality of proportional systems, and it is neither a good nor a bad thing.
 - d) This is a good thing because it ensures parties work in collaboration with one another based on a system of compromise and cooperation in citizens' best interests.
 - e) This is democratic because the share of seats a party gets is equal to their share of votes.
 - f) Unsure
6. On a scale of 1-5 with 1 being "Strong disagree" and 5 being "Strongly agree", rate the statements below:
Our voting system should...
 - _____ encourage more women, minorities and traditionally underrepresented groups to be elected to parliament.
 - _____ foster participation in the democratic process, encourage higher voter turnouts and reduce cynicism in politics and government.
 - _____ encourage political parties to collaborate, cooperate and compromise on issues as opposed to most decisions being made by a single party.
 - _____ make sure we have a local representative in our community.
 - _____ ensure people can vote for their preferred representative, without having to worry about phenomena such as "vote splitting" or "strategic voting".
 - _____ only encourage legitimate majorities based on the popular vote.
7. Which of the following voting systems do you believe Canada should use in 2019 and going forward? (Circle a, b, c or d)
 - a) Our current first-past-the-post, winner take all majoritarian system
 - b) A winner take all majoritarian system with ranked ballots (ie: Alternative vote/AV)
 - c) A proportional representation system (ie: MMP, STV, etc.)
 - d) Unsure

Please provide any additional commentary regarding different voting systems and electoral reform on the back of this paper. This may include other aspects not listed that you like/dislike about the different systems and what guiding principles you believe are important in our voting system.

Option	undemocratic	unfair	just reality	good, stable	good, I count	unsure
Tally	18	15	4	1	0	3
%	43	36	10	2	0	7

Question 4. How fair do you believe PR systems are?

Option	very	somewhat	unfair	very unfair	unsure
Tally	31	9	0	0	2
%	74	21	0	0	5

Question 5. PR systems tend to produce minority or coalition governments. How do you feel about this?

Option	undemocratic	unstable	just reality	good, collab	good, prop	unsure
Tally	0	2	4	23	11	1
%	0	5	10	55	26	2

Question 6 is a ‘strongly disagree’, 1, to ‘strongly agree’, 5, type question with six parts. Each part is identified by a phrase. As I did for question 5, I use a keyword or two to identify each phrase; the reader should consult the blank copy of the survey when these are unclear. Under each of the options 1 to 5 is the tally then the percentages for the question.

Question 6. Our voting system should encourage/ensure ...

Phrase	1	2	3	4	5
women and minorities	2	1	2	1	34
%	5	2	5	2	81
participation.	2	1	1	2	34
%	5	2	2	5	81
collaboration	2	1	2	5	30
%	5	2	5	12	71
local rep.	0	2	4	10	21
%	0	5	9	24	50
preferred rep	0	2	2	8	27
%	0	5	5	19	64
legit majority	7	0	5	9	14
%	17	0	12	21	33

Some people found the last question on majorities confusing (including myself); some got it upside down and others left it blank. I went through the surveys and changed a blank or a 1 to a 5 for anyone who had answered 5 to all the other parts. Here are the results after this change:

Our voting system should encourage/ensure ... Our voting system should encourage/ensure ...

Phrase	1	2	3	4	5
women and minorities	2	1	2	1	34
%	5	2	5	2	81
participation.	2	1	1	2	34
%	5	2	2	5	81
collaboration	2	1	2	5	30
%	5	2	5	12	71
local rep.	0	2	4	10	21
%	0	5	9	24	50
preferred rep	0	2	2	8	27
%	0	5	5	19	64
legit majority	3	0	5	9	19
%	7	0	12	21	45

Question 7. Going forward which voting system should we use?

Option	FTPT	Ranked	PR	unsure
Tally	3	2	34	3
%	7	5	81	7

6 Concluding remarks

On a personal level here are some things I took from our evening and the data we collected:

- Everyone's vote should count for something on the National level and only PR achieves this.
- Education on Electoral Reform is essential.
- Such education should be provided in a non-partisan environment and should be education not propaganda.

- Political parties should have the decency to see past the options that are going to benefit them in a partisan manner and think about all Canadians instead.

Let me close with the comment I would have put on my survey if I had had the time to fill one out:

I have lived and worked in Brandon since 1987. My vote has only counted in the sense that my voting Green locally is a tiny rain-drop in raising awareness for us to change our ways. Otherwise, my vote has not counted at all. I have worked extremely hard all my adult life. I am smart, employed, reasonably well paid, Canadian communities are filled with people like me in this regard. What kind of Democracy is it that none of us have a voice?

I, and most people I have spoken to, are really grateful that the ERRE was formed and that it is holding such wide ranging and inclusive consultations. Thank you!