

MDN
Mouvement
Démocratie
Nouvelle
Each vote counts

Parliament of Canada
Electoral Reform
Brief presented to the
Special Committee on Electoral Reform

By

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Summary

The day after a fifth defeat of the majority vote, a group of citizens founded the Mouvement pour une démocratie nouvelle (MDN), an organization that has been devoted to renewing the electoral system in Quebec since 1999.

Following historic consultations in Quebec and the involvement of civil society and the political parties, a consensus is now emerging based on principles for initiating a reform of the electoral system.

For MDN, these principles are also valid within the context of the current federal electoral reform.

Based on this analysis, in terms of choosing an electoral system, the MDN recommends that Canada adopt a proportional system.

THE MOUVEMENT POUR UNE DÉMOCRATIE NOUVELLE

It was in 1999, after another defeat of the majority vote in the 1998 Quebec election, that the Mouvement pour une démocratie nouvelle (MDN) was created. It has been promoting change in Quebec's voting system ever since.

The MDN has individual and collective members (unions, student associations, women's groups, etc.) from all across Quebec. It receives no financial assistance and all its actions are based on the volunteer involvement of its members.

Although the focus of our actions is the electoral system in Quebec, we believe that the current consultations at the federal level are an important opportunity. It is in fact the same first-past-the-post system (FPTP) that is being questioned and the principles that we promote apply to all levels of government.

HISTORY OF THE CONSULTATION PROCESS IN QUEBEC AND THE RESULTING CONSENSUS

The idea of reforming the electoral system in Quebec is nothing new. The desire to reform the FPTP system was expressed clearly after the results of the 1966 general election when the Union nationale was called on to form the government with a percentage of the vote that was less than that of the Liberal Party of Quebec.

The 1979 Green Paper

The Minister responsible for Parliamentary Electoral Reform, Robert Burns, tabled a green paper on electoral reform in the National Assembly in 1979.

The Commission de la représentation électorale in 1983

In 1983, the National Assembly asked the Commission de la représentation électorale (CRE) [Electoral Representation Commission] to study the FPTP system and alternative systems.

The Committee on Institutions in 2001

In December 2001, the Committee on Institutions, a National Assembly commission, decided to study reforms to the voting system.

The Estates General on the Reform of Democratic Institutions in 2002 and 2003

In 2002, the government created the Steering Committee on the Reform of Democratic Institutions. This committee's mandate was to develop, prepare and hold the Estates General on the Reform of Democratic Institutions.

For the Steering Committee, reforming the electoral system was the most important aspect of reforming democratic institutions, so much so that it once stated: “If there was only one reform possible, it would have to be this one.”¹

The draft bill to reform the Election Act in 2004 and subsequent actions

At the end of 2004, the Minister Responsible for the Reform of Democratic Institutions submitted a draft bill regarding a reform of the Election Act. The draft bill foresaw a compensatory mixed member voting system that set the number of members of the National Assembly representing a local electoral district at 77 and the number of elected candidates from the lists at 50. The Special Committee on the Election Act, assisted by an eight-member citizens committee, proceeded with special consultations and public consultations in 16 Quebec cities.

It should be noted that these steps were all for naught due to certain circumstances (resignation of the minister responsible, triggering of an election), opposition by groups that benefit from the current system and resistance from the caucus of the party in power.

Transpartisan meetings between civil society organizations in May and June 2016

As a result of an initiative by the MDN, representatives from all Quebec political parties and main civil society organizations met three times in May and June 2016. During these meetings, participants agreed on six common principles to help choose a voting system that reflects the will of Quebecers.

The purpose of a voting system is not only to allow for the formation of a stable government, which has the necessary leeway to fulfill its agenda. In addition to the objective of **governance**, we need to add the even more fundamental objective of **representation**. This means that the elected body that is the House of Commons or the National Assembly should accurately reflect the will of voters. Canadians want their voices to be heard and their vote to count.

THE MDN’S RESPONSE TO THE PRINCIPLES ADOPTED IN THE HOUSE OF COMMONS MOTION OF JUNE 17, 2016

First of all, we want to state that we largely agree with these principles. Furthermore, we feel that they are compatible with the changes we are seeking.

Effectiveness and legitimacy: trust, accurate will, less distortion, connection with the elected candidate

During the 2002 and 2003 consultations, a very large majority encompassing more than 90% of the stakeholders supported the principle that, following an election, the number of seats allocated to the parties should correspond as proportionally as possible to the votes that they actually received. A compensatory mixed member voting system would

¹ Steering Committee on the Reform of Democratic Institutions. *Prenez votre place!* [Stand Up and Be Counted] Report by the Steering Committee on the Reform of Democratic Institutions, Quebec, Bibliothèque nationale du Québec, 2003, p 34.

preserve the desire to maintain a connection with the elected candidate while causing less distortion.

Engagement: civility, collaboration, participation, underrepresented groups

We believe that a regional proportional representation voting system is the best way of promoting political pluralism. With a relatively low representation threshold, smaller parties that have a national base but widely dispersed supporters, as well as parties whose support is concentrated in a single province or territory, would see their chances of being adequately represented rise significantly.

Accessibility and inclusiveness: accessible, not too complex

Electoral systems with elements of proportionality are in use in most countries around the world. With proper explanation, Canadian voters could easily adapt to such a system. It should be remembered that at the municipal level, they are already called upon to simultaneously vote for a mayor as well as district or ward councillors.

Integrity: reliable and verifiable results, good process

This is a fundamental element of any voting system. The mechanisms for it are already in place, managed by Elections Canada and the Chief Electoral Officer. They could easily be adapted to a new voting system.

Local representation: accountability, local needs, access to the Member of Parliament (MP)

A compensatory mixed member voting system applied by region in which the majority of MPs continue to be elected through an FPTP system maintains local representation while providing citizens with other elected candidates acting at the regional level on larger issues.

Like the Steering Committee for the 2003 Estates General, we believe that a regional proportional representation voting system is the best way of meshing the principles of effectiveness and legitimacy while promoting regional participation in government decisions.

THE PRINCIPLES THAT WE PROMOTE

During the transpartisan meetings held in May and June 2016, the MDN, along with the political parties of Quebec and civil society organizations, agreed on principles to guide the renewal of the voting system in the province. These principles are equally valid in the thought process undertaken by the Parliament of Canada. In this light, what we are analyzing here is the voting system that we have currently versus the system that is the subject of a large consensus in Quebec.

Principle 1: Reflect the will of the people as accurately as possible	
First Past the Post Voting System	Compensatory Mixed Member Voting System
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • It still creates distortions between the percentage of votes received by a party and the percentage of seats obtained. • It results in lost votes (often more than half the votes). • It can supersede the will of the people. • It promotes bipartism rather than multipartism. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The proportional portion of the vote can correct distortions caused by the majority portion. • It allows for political pluralism. • It improves the participation of the electorate in elections.
Principle 2: Ensure a significant connection between voters and elected candidates. Ensure fair regional representation.	
First-Past-the-Post Voting System	Compensatory Mixed Member Voting System
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • It ensures representation based on territory to the detriment of other democratic objectives. • The division into ridings does not correspond to the regional reality. • Because of the distortions, democratic values are not respected in the regions. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • It maintains territorial representation thanks to the majority portion of the vote. • It respects regional democratic values better through the distribution of compensatory seats. • It changes the electoral culture. People change the way they look at their representation and elected candidates change the way they work at the local level.
Principle 3: Ensure the stability of the government through measures governing non-confidence motions	
First-Past-the-Post Voting System	Compensatory Mixed Member Voting System
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • It creates political instability when a minority government is elected, resulting in a new election shortly thereafter. • In this system, there is more of a culture of opposition. • Each new government can completely disregard all projects initiated by the previous government. This creates short-term administration of the state. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • It ensures government stability. • To limit the presence of parties that are very small, a minimum vote threshold could be implemented to obtain a seat in Parliament. • A coalition government represents a majority of voters. It is not the equivalent of a minority government. • Governing as a coalition allows for a mid- to long-term approach to developing policies and making decisions that are seen more as group accomplishments. • The implementation of specific

	mechanisms promotes government stability when a coalition is in power.
Principle 4: Offer a system that is easy to understand and carry out	
First-Past-the-Post Voting System	Compensatory Mixed Member Voting System
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • It is a very simple democratic exercise. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The compensatory members are selected from lists presented by the parties. • The political parties proceed based on their regular practices by submitting lists of candidates to their members.
Principle 5: Contribute to better representation of women, ethno-cultural communities and young people	
First-Past-the-Post Voting System	Compensatory Mixed Member Voting System
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • It is difficult to add effective corrective measures to this system. • It does not allow the electorate to get an overall view of the candidates presented by each party. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The use of lists makes it possible to alternate between women and men as well as integrate people from ethno-cultural communities and young people. • The electorate gets an overall view of the candidates from each party. • Possible addition of financial bonuses to parties that achieve representation objectives. • International experience shows that these lists promote better representation of women.*

* Arend Lijphant, Pattern of Democracy, Government Forms and Performances in Thirty-Six Countries, Yale University Press/New Haven and London, 2012.

CONDITIONS FOR SUCCESSFUL REFORM

In our view, three conditions need to be satisfied for this current initiative to be successful and meet the expectations of Canadians.

(1) Political will to overcome the obstacles of the process

This political will has been evident from the outset given that reflection and consultation mechanisms were introduced to fuel reform proposals. But the most difficult part is yet to come. Supporters of the status quo are telling us already that the time is not right, that the current system still serves Canada very well, etc. They also invoke examples of political dysfunction in countries using proportional voting systems, failing to mention that such cases are a very small minority and that often these phenomena can be explained by a much broader sociopolitical context. Or even still, they say they are in favour of such a change in principle, but they set down conditions or impose timetables that would make adopting a new voting system impossible before the next election.

(2) Mobilize the essential engagement of citizens

The process must be legitimate and the proposed changes must be social acceptable. The challenge is to involve ordinary citizens who have little understanding of the issue or who have an opinion but think it carries no weight. This issue does not just belong to the elite or political professionals. Various means have been experimented with internationally over the last few years.²

Support from civil society organizations in creating awareness and educating citizens

There are two aspects that appear particularly important: the awareness and education of the general public through civil society organizations that are given financial and logistical support when necessary as well as citizen-driven consultation mechanisms.

Citizen juries, a valid and credible means of consultation

These are citizen juries or committees composed of people chosen at random, either from interested volunteers or the general population. Various formulas have been tried in Quebec, British Columbia and Ontario with participants taking their role very seriously and issuing proposals that were very credible.

(3) A democratically approved reform using the various means at the government's disposal

As for the approval of any reform proposed in Canada or Quebec, suffice it to say that it must be done democratically, in a manner demonstrating the clear approval of a majority of the population. Several methods are possible:

The vote of MPs with a qualified majority

This is a vote by the MPs from parties supporting the desired change and representing more than 50% of the votes cast in the last election.

Prior referendum

Organizing it would undoubtedly require legislative changes and involve a long time frame, which we believe would jeopardize an effective reform by 2019, as the change in voting system itself taking approximately two years to be implemented according to the Chief Electoral Officer.

A referendum after experimenting with a new voting system

We would favour the formula in which there would be a referendum on the new voting system after experimenting with it in two elections, following the example of New Zealand.

Past experience in Canada with electoral system changes

Several fundamental changes to the electoral system have been introduced over the years by a simple vote by parliamentarians and without a referendum. These changes include giving women the right to vote, lowering the minimum voting age to 18 and

² PILON Dennis, Renewing Democracy: Citizen Engagement in Voting System Reform, Law Commission of Canada, Ottawa, 2002, http://publications.gc.ca/collections/collection_2007/lcc-cdc/JL2-37-2002E.pdf

establishing the rules for political party financing, etc. However, no one questions the legality or legitimacy of those changes.

Recommendations

The first-past-the-post voting system subjects the popular will to a mechanism that systematically produces disproportionate and absurd results. Consequently, it must undergo an in-depth reform so that our electoral system more accurately reflects the popular will as expressed by voters. We need to adopt a system where all votes count and where all parties are treated fairly.

For all these reasons, the MDN recommends:

- **Adopting a proportional system; and**
- **That this voting system reflect the principles agreed upon by consensus by political parties and civil society organizations.**