

BOLDLY STRIVE FOR GREATER DEMOCRACY

Brief Submitted to the Special Committee on Electoral Reform

by Benoit Charette

**Member of the Quebec National Assembly for the riding of Deux-Montagnes
on behalf of the Coalition Avenir Québec**

Parliament of Canada

October 7, 2016

Message from Benoit Charette

*Member of the Quebec National Assembly for the riding of Deux-Montagnes
and member of the Coalition Avenir Québec
Spokesperson for Canadian intergovernmental affairs
Spokesperson responsible for the reform of democratic institutions*



Distinguished members of the Special Committee on Electoral Reform:

My political party and I are driven by a feeling of urgency when confronted with falling voter turnout in elections and the public's growing cynicism towards the political system. We have studied this problem for some time and have come to conclusions that, although specific to Quebec, apply for the most part at the federal level.

The work we have done and the discussions we have had concerning the issue of electoral representation and the need for democratic renewal have resulted in a key finding that was discussed at our party's executive meeting in 2015: the cynicism and loss of confidence of citizens in the political system is our greatest obstacle and the real enemy we face as elected representatives. I firmly believe that the lack of representation and the distortions inherent in our current voting system are the root cause of the democratic deficit undermining our institutions. In politics, representation means the ability of an institution to speak on behalf of citizens, and makes it possible for institutions to take action to defend citizens' interests and aspirations. Without representation, we are bound hand and foot.

It is true that our electoral system has served us well, and that thus far it has made Canada into an enviable and peaceful democratic country. Nonetheless, we all find that the era of a two-party system is long past. Was not the most recent Canadian government elected with at least 50% of the vote that of Brian Mulroney in 1984? At the federal and provincial levels, we are forced to review our electoral system in relation to a reality not seen until very recently.

Governments across Canada, as in Quebec, are now made up of parties that only have the clear support of a minority of voters. The first-past-the-post voting system causes distortions that nonetheless allow them to govern as if they had the support of the majority. It's an illusion. What is worse, a majority of the voters are under-represented relative to their actual electoral weight. In our opinion, this is one of the main causes of the cynicism of many citizens, who have the impression that their vote counts for nothing and that they are politically powerless.

In the following pages, I will outline an entirely Quebec perspective on the issues that concern us, but which I firmly believe will shed some relevant light on your work. While I humbly hope to provide input for your committee work, on my own behalf and that of my political party colleagues, I wish you passionate and informed discussions.

Background

The CAQ is advocating an in-depth reform of Quebec's democratic institutions, and electoral reform in particular. The work begun by the Special Committee on Electoral Reform is meaningful with respect to the CAQ's project. It goes without saying that electoral reform, or a failure to introduce reforms, will have major repercussions for Quebec, and possibly on our political party's project. Although we do not believe that voting systems at the federal and provincial levels need to be standardized, we believe that the implementation of significant electoral reform in Ottawa will be a launch pad for implementing similar reforms in Quebec. Similarly, if you fail in your efforts, it may have an opposite effect in that it may discourage Quebec's political class regarding our ability to go ahead with this ambitious project for society, and may further delay what in our opinion is a necessary renewal of democracy.

Quebec consensus

There is a strong consensus in Quebec in favour of reforming the voting system, which has unfortunately been ignored by the parties that have recently governed Quebec. When the Parti Québécois was in power, it included reform of the voting system in its electoral platform, starting in 1976, but it failed to act on its promise despite 20 years in power. In March 2015, a survey conducted by the CROP polling firm as part of the Making Electoral Democracy Work project demonstrated that 70% of Quebecers were in favour of adopting a voting system that reflects the number of votes received by the parties.

Democratic deficit

Although a strictly electoral system renewal for our democratic institutions would not on its own be able to resolve the democratic deficit that overwhelms us or be enough to restore Quebecers' confidence in the political class, there is no doubt in the minds of CAQ members that reform of the voting system is the cornerstone that would help us restore confidence. The CAQ's work is therefore based on the principle of representation. We feel that each citizen's vote should be taken into consideration not only in the election results, but also in the actual political representation that stems from the results. We believe that the democratic weight thus expressed by the people for each political party should be accurately represented in Parliament.

We firmly believe that negating the principle of representation is the root of a deeper democratic deficit, the main symptoms of which are clearly the following:

Falling voter turnout:

- For the past 20 years, voter turnout has been decreasing in Quebec. It fell from 82% in 1994 to 71% in 2014, and hit a record low of 57% in 2008.
- According to Laval University researchers, the participation rate of voters under age 45 decreased by 30 percentage points between 1985 and 2008.

Widespread cynicism and a loss of confidence in the political class are undermining the legitimacy of politicians and their actions:

- According to a survey published in *La Presse* in 2010, 85% of respondents said they had little or no confidence in politicians.¹

- In the *Baromètre des professions de 2015*, politicians ranked last, just after used car salesmen, among occupations in which people placed the least amount of trust.²

Of course, the drop in voter turnout and the loss of confidence demonstrated above are not entirely the result of our voting system. But it seems clear that reforms would breathe new life into our institutions, and that greater representation of the votes cast would be the necessary spark for Quebecers to have a shared and broader interest in politics at election time, and this would ultimately pave the way to rebuilding trust.

Importance of the voting system

In our opinion, representation determines an institution's capacity to claim that it speaks on behalf of the people. It is representation that implicitly determines the legitimacy to act on the people's behalf and defend their interests and aspirations. However, the current voting system in Quebec, as in the rest of Canada, is not based on the principle of representation. It almost systematically produces distortions in the representation in the National Assembly of the votes cast. Between the number of seats and the percentage of votes obtained by a political party, these distortions are sometimes considerable, as shown in the following recent results:

- In 2014, the Quebec Liberal Party obtained 56% of the seats in the National Assembly, while obtaining 42% of the votes cast.
- In 2012, although the Parti Québécois and the Liberal Party each obtained less than one third of the votes cast, respectively, their representation in terms of seats in the National Assembly was 43% and 40% respectively. With 27% of the votes, the CAQ obtained only 15% of the seats.

The 1998 Quebec election clearly illustrates the democratic deficit we wish to demonstrate here.

- In 1998, the Quebec Liberal Party obtained more votes than the Parti Québécois: 44% versus 43%. But it was the Parti Québécois that formed the government, which was also a majority government with 61% of the seats.

As the following table shows, in the case of 9 elections out of 16, our current voting system produced nine false majorities in the past 60 years in Quebec. This clearly demonstrates the systematic character of distortions produced in our electoral system.

¹ <http://www.lapresse.ca/actualites/politique/politique-quebecoise/201005/07/01-4278043-les-politiciens-ninspirent-pas-confiance.php>

² http://leger360.com/admin/upload/publi_pdf/sofr20150330.pdf

Table I: 9 False Majorities in 16 Elections

TAUX PARTICIPATION		PQ			vntee			IP			vntee			ADQWCAQ			vntee			CS			vntee			UN/autres		votes Total		mai.
ANNÉE	INSCRITS	Seats	%	%	Seats	%	%	Seats	%	%	Seats	%	%	Seats	%	%	Seats	%	%	Seats	%	%	Seats	%	%	Seats	%	%	Total	mai.
1956		20	22%	45%																72	77%	52%				93	47			
1960		51	54%	51%																43	45%	47%				95	48			
1966		50	46%	47%		0%														56	53%	41%				108	54			
1970		72	67%	45%	7	6%	23%													29	27%	31%				108	54			
1973		102	93%	55%	6	5%	30%													2	0,2%	10%				110	55			
1976		26	24%	34%	71	65%	41%													13	12%	24%				110	55			
1981		42	34%	46%	80	66%	49%																			122	61			
1985		99	81%	56%	23	19%	39%																			122	61			
1989	75%	92	74%	50%	29	23%	40%													4	3%	10%				125	63			
1994	82%	47	38%	44%	77	62%	45%	1	0,8%	7%																125	63			
1998	78%	48	38%	44%	76	61%	43%	1	0,8%	12%																125	63			
2003	70%	76	61%	46%	45	36%	33%	4	3%	18%																125	63			
2007	71%	48	38%	33%	36	29%	28%	41	33%	31%																125	63			
2008	57%	66	53%	42%	51	41%	35%	7	6%	16%	1	0,8%	4%													125	63			
2012	75%	50	40%	31%	54	43%	32%	19	15%	27%	2	1,6%	6%													125	63			
2014	71%	70	56%	42%	30	24%	25%	22	18%	23%	3	2,4%	8%													125	63			

9	False majority (less than 50%)
5	Small majority (52%, 51%, 55%, 56%, 50%)
2	Minority
16	Total

2 Little or no distortion

In some regions of Quebec, we can see that with less than 50% of the votes across a region, a party can nonetheless elect its candidates in 100% of the region's ridings, while a majority of the voters are opposed to the platform of the winning party.

The finding is clear: the first-past-the-post voting system does not adhere to the principle of representation. What is worse, it betrays this principle as well as the feeling that Quebecers can have a real impact on the determining factors of their collective future.

In favour of a mixed proportional voting system with regional lists

The CAQ is committed to reforming the voting system in Quebec and, in that regard, proposes the introduction of a mixed proportional voting system with regional lists. This reform would be part of a comprehensive reform of democratic institutions, including other aspects that will not be discussed in this brief, but for which several proposals were endorsed at the general executive meeting in 2015.

A "mixed proportional" system is one that introduces a compromise between the first-past-the-post method and the pure proportional method. A portion of the seats are allocated according to the majority voting system and another portion based on the percentage of votes obtained. In the CAQ's proposal, the candidates on the lists would still be associated with a region. We recommend the establishment of regional lists so that all of the elected candidates have direct obligations to the people who elected them, which is not the case with a pure proportional system or a system involving national lists.

In the model we are proposing for Quebec, of the 125 seats in the National Assembly, 75 would be allocated to candidates elected in ridings, as is currently done, while the 50 others would be elected after being entered on the regional lists. The lists would be gender-balanced with men and women represented in a 50-50 proportion. Voters would be required to indicate two choices on their ballot:

one for a candidate to represent their riding, and another for the party they would like to see in power.

The voting system we propose has the advantage of ensuring appropriate representation for the regions and at the same time would enable us to achieve gender parity in the National Assembly. We think that a similar voting system should be considered for the rest of Canada.

Advantages of the mixed proportional voting system with regional lists

Every vote counts

Our proposal has two objectives. The first is for the votes of all citizens to have a direct impact on the final outcome of the election. With a mixed proportional voting system, every vote counts. The second is for the results of the votes cast to be accurately reflected in the representation and distribution of seats in the National Assembly. In this respect, no system other than a proportional system can achieve this objective as effectively.

Deterrence of strategic voting: An assembly that represents and defends the actual will of the people

The changes we propose are not merely changes to the voting system, but in broader terms, a change in voting behaviour. The determining factors in elections will be significantly changed with the introduction of a mixed proportional voting system with regional lists, because in addition to choosing the winning candidate in the riding, people will know that their votes will have an impact across the region. Voters will think less in terms of “who can win” and more in terms of “who is best suited to represent my interests.” Certainly, one of the highly beneficial effects of the voting system we propose is that it minimizes voter interest in strategic voting.

Change in the culture of the National Assembly

The behavioural change brought about by a mixed proportional voting system with regional lists is not limited to the voters. It will also influence the MNAs themselves. For the time being, there can only be a single representative in a given area. Each MNA has a bit of territory for which he or she is the sole representative. With the reform that we are proposing, each region will have more than one representative, and probably more than one party will be represented in each area. MNAs from opposing parties will therefore be called upon to mobilize and work together to defend regional issues. On an ad-hoc basis, regional interests will prevail over partisan interests, which can only increase the degree of collaboration among MNAs outside their party affiliations. This is how the electoral reform will promote a change of culture within the National Assembly or the House of Commons.

Gender parity

It has been demonstrated in Quebec that the number of women elected is directly related to the number of women who run as candidates for election. Currently, an average of 30% of the candidates who run in elections are women, and 30% of the MNAs that Quebecers elect to the National Assembly are women. By making gender parity mandatory on candidate lists, we believe that the system we propose will achieve a gender parity ratio where between 40% and 60% of women candidates are elected, which would be a significant advance for the participation of women in politics.

A system consistent with Quebecers' democratic values

Another advantage of the mixed proportional voting system with regional lists is that it is easy to understand and consistent with the democratic values of Quebecers and Canadians. The only difference would be that voters have to make two choices rather than one, as is currently the case: one choice to indicate the candidate that the voter wants to represent the riding and another choice to determine the political party that will represent the region. The simplicity of introducing this voting system is a strong argument behind our decision in the sense that we do not want to destabilize or confuse people, but instead, reinforce their democratic convictions. The fact that the proposed system is easy to understand was a fundamental reason in support of the choice we made.

A representative and stable system

We reject the argument that our proposed voting system will lead to instability and political deadlock, mainly because our proposal is based on respect for the expressed will of the people. We cannot advocate stability if we deny the will of the people. In short, we see representation as an opposing force against instability, and it is a guiding value in our discussions about voting system reform.

Furthermore, the system has been demonstrated to be viable in Scotland and in Germany, in particular. Let's take the example of Scotland, which is closer to what we are proposing. Since 1999, following the introduction of a mixed proportional voting system, Scotland has had to deal with minority governments. However, Scotland also adopted a statute on fixed date elections that includes the requirement that the approval of two thirds of the chamber must be obtained to dissolve Parliament. The outcome has been very positive. During the 1999, 2003 and 2007 elections, no party succeeded in obtaining a majority of the votes on its own in order to be elected as a majority government. Nevertheless, these governments have all served their four-year terms. We believe that the two-party system is at an end and that it is necessary to reform the system in order to embrace this reality and the political diversity it implies. What do we want: a majority government that only has the support of a minority, or a minority government whose coalitions and ad hoc collaborative arrangements have the support of the majority? This is the choice we face.

Conclusion

We know that we have presented a very Quebec perspective on the issues that are the subject of the Committee's work. That said, we believe that the overarching principles as much as the proposed voting system can be applied across Canada. In that regard, our main recommendations are the following:

- That the principle of representation have a central place in your discussions:
 1. Every vote counts;
 2. The composition of the House of Commons must be an accurate reflection of the votes cast.
- That the Government of Canada adopt a mixed proportional voting system with regional lists, based on a specific formula of its choosing.

However, we believe that there is no obligation to harmonize the federal and provincial voting systems and in that regard, we hope that you will carry out an ambitious, structural reform of the electoral system based on the realities specific to your level of government. Maintaining the status quo would be the worst scenario for Quebec, for Canada and for democracy. In that regard, you have an obligation to achieve success. We expect you to be the initiators of democratic renewal across Canada, the impact of which will be felt in all of the provinces.

It is necessary to restore Canadians' trust in the political system. The cornerstone for achieving that goal will definitely be the electoral reforms that you introduce.

Esteemed Committee members: It is up to you to boldly strive for greater democracy.