

SUBMISSION TO ERRE

from Philip Symons

Introduction

Prime Minister Trudeau made an election promise that the 2015 federal election would be the last using the First Past the Post (FPTP) voting system. I congratulate him on this promise, and look forward to the ERRE recommending some form of Proportional Representation.

Voting Systems

There are several systems of proportional representation (PR), but three that are suitable for Canada, that fulfill the ERRE's conditions and are currently being talked about are:

- Single Transferable Vote (STV),
- Mixed Member Proportional (MMP), and
- Rural-Urban Proportional Representation (RU-PR).

Each of these systems can have slightly different forms. Some forms allow politicians to give political parties additional powers over voters, e.g., parties could present a closed list in one form of MMP that allows parties to select the order in which members from their party will be elected in the "top-up" list used to obtain PR. For that reason, the B.C. Citizens' Assembly recommended STV over MMP.

However, no system is perfect. Each may have an advantage or disadvantage not evident in other systems. RU-PR is a compromise between STV and MMP, and may, therefore, be more acceptable to some political parties and their members than other systems. I shall accept whichever PR system the ERRE recommends.

N.B: the Alternative Vote (AV) or ranked ballot that was earlier favoured by the Liberal Party does not *by itself* result in proportional representation. It is, in fact, worse than FPTP. However, it can be incorporated as a part of one of the above PR systems.

Advantages of PR

- Everyone's vote counts, there's no need for a person in an electoral district that is "safe" for a party that person doesn't favour to feel voting is a waste of time.
- Minority governments, more common with PR than with FPTP, are about as stable as majority governments except in a couple of countries always cited by those who want to retain FPTP.
- Policy swings are less violent with PR than FPTP because the ruling party often must compromise with opposition parties to get a policy passed. At the next election, if an opposition party wins, it already has a policy to which it agreed. There will be costs if it tries to do more than tweak it now.

Referendums

A referendum should be held *after* the new electoral system has been used in at least one election, and preferably two. The ignorance of the public, and of some politicians, on

electoral systems is abysmal, making the public vulnerable to lies and exaggerations by people and parties opposed to PR.

We have seen this in B.C. where the people voted nearly 59% in favour of STV at the first referendum when they were still somewhat familiar with the work of the B.C. Citizens' Assembly. However, the vote failed to pass because the B.C. Liberals, who did not want change, had set the threshold at 60%. At the second referendum, when parties opposing STV (the B.C. Liberals and B.C. NDP) had had time for fear-mongering and to spread myths and falsehoods, the referendum failed miserably.

Referendums under such conditions are meaningless and undemocratic, for should a party want to retain FPTP before a PR system has been tried, it can do as the B.C. Liberals and NDP did. Or should the Liberal Party of Canada not want to change from FPTP (now that they have a false majority under that system), they could support the call for a referendum before PR is tried, have it fail for the reasons above, and then say, "The people didn't want to change from FPTP, so we had to break our promise." Can one call that democracy?

Author bi-line: I am a retired fisheries scientist who has taken an interest in democracy and electoral systems for over twenty years.