
Round Table on Proportional Representation

Traditionally, political representation has been based on territory. A member of Parliament is elected from a specific constituency and once elected he or she represents all of the interests of all of the constituents. In recent years various groups have been arguing for an understanding of representation not based solely on territory but which takes into account other factors including sex and ethnicity. Parliament, it is argued, does not reflect well enough the composition of the whole of society. This issue was discussed at the 35th Conference of the Canadian Region of the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association held in Winnipeg. The lead speakers were John MacKay, MLA of New Brunswick and Dennis Richards, MLA of Nova Scotia. The following extracts are based upon the proceedings prepared by Manitoba Hansard. The complete transcript is available from the Clerk of the Legislative Assembly of Manitoba.

John McKay, MLA (New Brunswick): The electoral system as it now exists in Canada returns one member of Parliament for each constituency. Parties nominate one candidate; the voter indicates his preference by marking opposite one name on the ballot and the candidate with the highest number of votes wins. The *Charter of Rights and Freedoms* guarantees every Canadian citizen a right to vote and to be considered equal under the law. But does the Charter require each person's vote to be of equal weight? This issue was at the heart of discussions around the ideal average population for ridings and the amount of deviation allowed from the average during the representation and electoral boundaries commission in recent hearings in New Brunswick.

The first past the post system allows an elected member to win his seat or her seat without an absolute majority in his district. All they need is to receive more votes than the nearest runner up. This means it is possible and indeed most often the case that the political party with the majority of seats in the House of Commons will not have received the majority of the popular vote. In other words, with very few exceptions our national government has had more votes cast against it than it has in favour. In the 1980 federal election, there were over a half million Liberal votes in Saskatchewan, Alberta, B.C., but the party was wiped out in the West because all of

these votes did not produce a single member in the caucus of a majority government.

Opponents of the first past the post system feel that this under-representation exaggerates the regionalization of the country. By giving the Liberals no seats in Alberta and occasionally the Progressive Conservatives virtually no seats in Quebec, this system appears to confer an image of unanimity on provinces. The traditional voting system reflects the philosophy of unlimited majority rule, gives the voters representatives they did not vote for, reduces the opportunities for minorities to be represented and gives political parties undue power over all citizens. This system can distort the translation of popular vote shares into legislative seat shares leading to overrepresentation of the party that wins the largest share of the vote, underrepresentation of the second place party and even nonrepresentation of smaller parties.

Supporters of our present electoral system feel that measured against other countries, Canada does well nationally. Our system does less well in ensuring proportionality in the level of regions and provinces. Supporters of the classical theory of election by plurality from single member constituencies feel that it concentrates politics almost completely in two parties enabling the people to exercise a clear choice of government and opposition. Since the party that gets the

plurality of the popular vote will almost certainly get a clear majority of elected members it produces strong and stable governments.

This system has basically been in effect for some 600 years in Britain and more than two centuries in the United States and Canada. There have been calls for changes that in the view of the proponents would result in more equitable representation through proportional representation or some variant of that. The calls tend to come from the losers under the current system.

In 1987, the New Brunswick Liberals won 100 percent of the seats in the Legislature. The Progressive Conservative Party received 28 percent of the vote but did not receive one seat. The NDP party received 10.5 percent of the vote but did not get a single seat. With proportional representation, the Progressive Conservative Party would have had 16 seats in the New Brunswick Legislature at that time and the New Democratic Party would have had six.

In the 1993 Prince Edward Island provincial election, the P.C.s with 39 percent of the vote, won only 3 percent of the seats while the Liberals with 54 percent of the vote ended up with 97 percent of the seats. It can work the other way as well. In 1974 in New Brunswick, the Liberals received more than 2,000 more votes than the P.C.s, but the P.C.s formed the government. The same thing happened in the 1970 provincial election in which Louis Robichaud's government was defeated. He received the most votes in the province but Mr. Hatfield's party formed the government.

In the 1990 Ontario provincial election, 37 percent of the popular vote gave Mr. Rae's New Democratic Party a large majority, 57 percent of the seats, while the Liberals with 32 percent of the vote, ended up with just 27 percent of the seats. We have seen a similar situation recently in British Columbia.

In the last federal election the Progressive Conservative Party received well over two million votes and ended up with two seats. Their 16 percent of the vote produced only .7 percent of the total seats in the House of Commons. The Bloc Québécois receiving 340,000 votes fewer than the P.C.s ended up with 18 percent of the seats. The Reform Party was matched closest. They received 18 percent of the vote and ended up with 17 percent of the seats. The Liberals, believe it or not, in what was seen as quite a massive mandate received only 41 percent of the popular vote and took 60 percent of the seats. The results would have been quite different under proportional representation. In the last federal election the Liberals would have ended up with 122 seats, the P.C.s would have had 47 seats, the Bloc Québécois 40 seats, the Reform Party would have been the Official Opposition with 55 seats and there would have been 11

other seats and, of course, a minority government. Such was the state of the first past the post syndrome where the winner takes all in a seat so long as he has the highest number of votes.

Some form of proportional representation is now used in many countries including Australia and New Zealand. In the Australian House of Representatives voters list candidates in order of preference and if no one candidate wins an overall majority the lowest place drops out and his or her votes are transferred. This continues until a candidate has an overall majority. Other examples of proportional representation include:

- In France, election to the National Assembly is by the second-ballot system. Candidates, who initially winning 50 percent or more of the vote, are considered elected. Those with less than 12.5 percent of the vote are dropped off and then everybody votes again.
- In Germany, half the members of the Bundestag are directly elected by a constituency and the other half by proportional representation from party lists. To obtain seats in the Bundestag by proportional representation a party must receive more than 5 percent of the vote.
- In Italy, there is a combination of first past the post and proportional representation. There are 630 seats in the Italian Parliament, 472 elected on the first past the post system and 158 on the basis of proportional representation. Italy did have a system of preferred voting for four candidates in a riding by their listed number but abandoned that system in 1991.
- Israel, which is an interesting one, involves proportional representation by voting for the party list in a multimember constituency. Any party receiving over 1.5 percent of the overall vote can gain representation in the Knesset and the results can be a very fractured Legislature.
- In Ireland, there is a single transfer of a vote in constituencies of three or four or five members.

All systems of representation have both their advantages and disadvantages. I would suggest that proportional representation tends to produce less cohesive government than the first past the post system. Furthermore there are real problems down the road for proportional representation if it goes beyond trying to reflect the overall vote of the electorate and tries to place

emphasis on gender or cultural diversity. Minorities may insist on more representation in the equation.



Dennis Richards, MLA (Nova Scotia): The subject of electoral systems ought to be of interest to anyone concerned with the operation of democratic systems of government. In representative democracies elections perform two fundamental tasks. They confer authorization upon those chosen to represent the electors and hold representatives accountable for their actions while in office. Strictly defined, electoral systems are the mechanisms by which the preferences of citizens are translated into seats in their respective institutions. As a result, the behaviour of political parties and candidates for elected office will in large part be conditioned by the shape of its electoral system.

Canada's electoral system is weighted in favour of regional preferences so that parties are often encouraged to emphasize regional rather than national concerns during election campaigns. What is more important, the way in which an electoral system translates votes into seats may influence the degree of public support for the very system itself. For example, if citizens do not perceive that their preferences are adequately reflected in the Legislature following an election, support for the system is generally likely to decline. Voter turnout during elections will drop off, respect for politicians will fall and the laws enacted by that government will not seem to be fully legitimate. Also, for many citizens an election marks the only occasion of any form of political participation. It is therefore very important that electoral systems be seen as fair and capable of fulfilling public expectations. If not, democracy itself is at risk.

Proportional representation seeks to achieve representation by proportion of votes received. This system demands more than one person be elected from a constituency so that it contains several seats. These seats are filled in proportion to the way the electorate votes. This system was quite in vogue in Canada about 40 years ago when cities like Winnipeg, Calgary, Edmonton and Vancouver adopted it. It is still popular in many countries however, there are about as many different systems of proportional representation as there are ideas about government. One of the best known is the Hare system where electors go to the polls to cast a vote for every listed candidate in order of their preference. Given that there are often many candidates, a quota of votes is to be determined. The quota system for election is determined by dividing the number of people voting by the number of seats to be filled plus one, the one being allowed for spoiled ballots.

Next is the count. First choices are counted for each candidate and anyone who meets the quota is declared elected. Of course, there follows a host of dilemmas. If he or she is elected with more than quota, the surplus is transferred to second choices. If none of the hopefuls has a quota or if too few have it, then the person with the least choices is eliminated and the second preferences on his or her ballots are distributed as marked. If this is not enough, the next lowest candidate is put out and the second choices are allocated. This system goes on until the number of candidates reach quota. One of the main criticisms of this system is that it is far too complicated.

Electoral systems are not perfect. In our efforts to assess each system we should ask ourselves whether or not electoral systems are effective in achieving certain desired outcomes. These may be summarized in two statements. First, any election at the national or provincial level should result in a strong and stable government which reflects the main trends of public opinion; and, second, governments should govern according to the wishes of the majority of the electorate while respecting different points of view in finding ways of including the opinions of minorities and other significant groups in society.

I have identified five strengths of our present first past the post system.

- Research shows that first past the post electoral systems more likely result in a single-party government, often a majority government. Voters know that when they vote for a candidate or party they are choosing a government.
- Second, the first past the post system results in a more stable government. Coalitions of various parties, groups forming governments, are much less likely. This form of government is not subject to defeat if the votes of non confidence occur. This enables government freedom to complete its full legislative mandate. Government is better able to effectively carry out its legislative agenda on which they campaigned.
- Third, there is a relative simplicity to the election process. The voting process is not complicated, rather it is straightforward. Simply put, the candidate who gets the most votes wins.
- Fourth, the first past the post electoral system supports the development of a strong party system with a strong sense of loyalty among its members. This results in government working as a team. The voter both votes for an individual to represent them and an

individual who is a member of a party with a defined legislative agenda. This is critical, because parties develop positions and policies which voters can identify and choose to support or reject.

- Fifth, the first past the post system together with a single member being elected from a constituency ensures a direct link in connection between the elected representatives and the electors.

I will now point out what I consider to be some of the weaknesses of proportional representation. A proportional representational system does not necessarily achieve the goal it claims to achieve. A 1991 study of electoral systems in 25 countries showed that it is possible for the first past the post system to produce a more proportional result than a proportional representation system. There are many other factors involved, such as the number of parties involved in the election, which may influence the personality of electoral outcomes. There is a potential in the proportional representation system to foster fringe voices and more extreme views within society because it has the potential to give such opinions a legislative platform from which to champion their cause. This can result in unduly magnifying the concern.

Since proportional representation generally produces a coalition government, it would be rare for a party to get a majority. This completely changes and undermines the basis of our system of cabinet government. Our form of democratic government depends on the party in power having enough people elected to enable it to carry out its legislative program. A party without a majority would be forced to battle every proposal or enter into a coalition with some other party or parties. This results in less stable government. With proportional representation system, voters do not actually elect a government. The basis of proportional representation system requires that more than one person be elected from a constituency. The electorate therefore has no say in voting for whom actually will fill and form the government.

In addition, responsible connection between the elected officials and the electorate is muddled and unclear. And finally, in a country as large and as relatively sparsely populated as Canada, which already has very strong regional feelings and interests, a proportional representation system could easily foster a greater number of regional parties at the federal level. This would only compound the problem of regional versus national interests. This is also true within certain provinces as many have strong regional tendencies within their jurisdictions.

Glenn Hagel, MLA (Saskatchewan): I think a combination of direct representation has relevance not only at the national level but also at the provincial level as well.

We are inclined, those of us who have won first past the post systems, to place a high value on the significance of solid government and party representation, and I think that is consistent with values that Canadians hold in all of our jurisdictions. But I think we also have to recognize that in recent times the system of election that we have does generate cynicism regarding the value of the vote being cast by someone who wants to support their party. We can all quote in recent times examples where parties have literally gotten more than 20 percent of the popular vote in an election. We have had some examples where in fact they had more than 20 percent vote and zero representation. We can point to even more examples where the parties had more than 20 percent popular support and did not hold official party status in the House after the election. What I suggest is that if a party receives a certain percent of the popular vote it should be assured that it will end up with party status in the Legislature. Presumably, it would be represented at least by the leader of that party who would be a strong spokesperson for the ideology and the values and the priorities that were enunciated by that party up to and during an election time. I think that if we do not move or if we do not seriously consider moving in that direction, we risk jeopardizing the respect that people have for the role of political parties in our system. I suggest to you, if that continues to decline, then our citizens will begin to look at other democratic models which are not consistent with the system of parliamentary democracy that we have and to see them more attractive than they do now.



Lloyd Johnson, MLA (Saskatchewan): The Canadian political system is based on the principle of responsible government. That basically requires a system that is first past the post because it means that people have to have learned the skills and demonstrated the willingness to compromise. You do not become an elected person and then compromise in the Assembly. You compromise before you get there. And those individuals, parties and people with ideas who are not prepared to compromise never get there. They become the fringe that does not win. So what happens under our system, and it is unwritten but it is basic to what takes place, is that an educational process starts before you run for office. That process starts with the electorate. People understand that, when they vote, they are compromising to get the

best possible government they can, or at least a strong and effective opposition to that government.

So I think that it is a mistake for anyone to move towards proportional representation anticipating that that solves problems. I will say to you that it is my belief that it does not solve any problems. What it does is it delays the point of reckoning with those problems to the point where they present major difficulties for the system of responsible government.

The need to compromise will always be a part of politics. Compromise is best done by the electorate, at the beginning of the process so that members are free to act on the mandate they have received from the people, and not be forced to compromise the principles upon which they were elected to act, after they are already in the legislature.



Don Boudria, MP (House of Commons): The proportional system is never really proportional anyway; most of them have thresholds that you have to achieve before the proportional system actually kicks in—5 percent, 10 percent, 12 percent, depending on some jurisdictions. I know we have had the case of Israel where I think we heard that it was only one and a half percent, but still it is not a truly, so-called proportional. Now I am not sure why it has to be to begin with, but that would be I believe one argument.

The proportional system, unfortunately I think, allows single-issue extremism, to have too wide a place on the public spectrum.

If I think of countries like France, I think small, extremists groups have managed to have voices in their national parliament because of the proportional system that was there. Incidentally, there were two forms of proportional representation in France, one of them of the kind that was described earlier and the second one being the second round of voting. The combination of the two gave smaller fringe groups lots of opportunity to be heard and, some would argue, and I would, too much opportunity to be heard.

Also, I think that, and it is fashionable, at least now, to argue that political parties are already powerful enough, if not too powerful, if we develop lists and where lists only as opposed to the single member become important or lists become more important by whatever form, you are in fact increasing even more the importance of political parties as opposed to individual parliamentarians.

There is I think another argument there why we would not want to go in that direction. The fact that the system is complicated, as has been expressed earlier, I think is another factor to bear in mind. We are familiar with the system under which we operate as parliamentarians. Even it, and I think our system is relatively simple, but even it, in the minds of some of our constituents, is already plenty complicated. People have some difficulty, too many of them, in understanding the intricacies of what is responsible government. How does it work? How come you do not really vote for the Prime Minister? His name is not on the ballot but you get one anyway. What is the difference between federal and provincial office?

Some jurisdictions even have two different levels of municipal government, each one elected separately. That is the case where I live, in the province of Ontario, at least in the part of Ontario where I live. So there are all those factors.



Dan D'Autremont, MLA (Saskatchewan): I agree with those who say responsible government is one of the key points when we look at proportional representation versus first past the post.

Who am I responsible to if I am elected by proportional representation? Am I responsible to those voters or am I responsible to the party elite that placed my name up high enough on the list that I get to become a member of whatever Legislature or House that I may be seeking. I think that becomes very, very important.

When a constituent has a concern, who do they go to? They may not know me personally. I may be from the other end of the province, but yet I was elected because they happened to put a checkmark on the party which I belong to. Is their person elected close to them responsible for them or am I, who was the representative of that party, responsible?

I think we get away from the idea of responsible government when we go to proportional representation because we lose contact with the voter who is most immediate to us. When I am elected as a member for my constituency, I am elected to represent not just those that voted for me and, in my case, first past the post works real well, I did not get 50 percent. But I represent all of the voters there. They all have the opportunity to come to me with concerns and expect me, rightfully so, to deal with those concerns. It is my belief that first past the post represents the needs, the desires and the history of Canada and our provinces.