

## Parliament and Democracy in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century: The Case for Proportional Representation

In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, advocates of democratic reform fought to ensure that all Canadians had the right to vote. The long battle for women's suffrage was won in 1920 when Canadian women finally gained the right to vote. First Nations people finally won recognition of their right to cast a ballot in federal elections in 1960. Advocates of universal suffrage relied on an important but basic principle—the belief that every Canadian counted, and that they had a right to have their views taken into account in governing the affairs of the nation.

Unfortunately, under our present electoral system, the votes of most Canadians do not count. Most Canadians vote for candidates and parties that don't win elections. As a result, they have no say over the direction of our country. Some may consider this to be a sweeping statement, an unfair indictment of our present electoral system. But let us look at the facts.

The current system divides Canada into 301 separate contests, each of which can be won with less than half the votes cast. A candidate can get elected if he or she gets just one vote more than his or closest rival, even if 70% of his or her constituents voted for somebody else. Parties can, and usually do, win majority governments—which give them 100% of the power—with less than 50% of the vote. Votes for candidates who do not win are basically wasted.

Voters know that. As a result, many cast their ballots strategically *against* candidates and parties they do not like, rather than voting *for* parties and candidates that they do. The result: politics and the democratic process are devalued—reduced to a game where the objective is to defeat the enemy—when democracy should be about making choices, advocating progress and building a better country.

The growing lack of faith in the political process can be seen most clearly in the declining rate of participation in general elections. In 1968, 80% of eligible voters cast a ballot. In November 2000, barely 60% bothered to vote. To be sure, there are fluctuations from one election to another. But the downward trend is clear.

The lack of faith in politics can be seen, too, in the number of Canadians who have chosen participation in interest groups and citizens' groups as their primary outlet for political involvement. These groups are an important and valuable part of the democratic debate in our society. They provide new ideas and are a means for citizens to shape public debate. But I cannot help but be troubled by the number of Canadians involved in these groups who have all but given up on the political process. An increasing number of thoughtful Canadians are coming to believe that politics doesn't matter, that the best way to lead change is to do so from outside the system.

When large numbers of Canadians believe that the best way to lead change is to do so from outside the system, it suggests that maybe the time has come to change the system.

There are other signs pointing to the need for change. I remember a series of ads run by my party in 1993 where we suggested that "Ottawa hasn't got the message." But it is not really surprising that Ottawa hasn't gotten the message when the Parliament Canadians send to Ottawa is, at best, a distorted representation of the message Canadians were trying to send.

Let us look at some concrete examples from the last federal election. In November 2000, the Chrétien Liberals won 172 seats out of 301—57.5% of the seats—with 40.8% of the national vote. The number of votes needed to elect a Liberal MP was 30,218. But it took 83,918 votes to elect a



single New Democrat MP, and 130,316 votes to elect a Conservative MP.

The New Democrats and Conservatives together won 13 fewer seats than the Bloc Quebecois, despite receiving more than double the total number of votes.

The regional results are even more disturbing. They also suggest that the system may be harmful to national unity because it paints a picture of the country to itself that does not reflect the reality on the ground. It exaggerates the differences in Canadians' political preferences from one region to another. Worse, it encourages the political class of the country to pits voters in one region against voters in another region because a plurality of support in one region of the country can be turned into a majority of seats in that region.

In Ontario, with 51.5% of the votes, the Liberals won 100 of 103 seats. More than 2.1 million votes in Ontario (more than those who voted in Manitoba, Saskatchewan and the four Atlantic provinces combined, which together have 60 seats) earned only three seats for other parties (two for the Alliance and one for the New Democrats). To Canadians outside Ontario, it appears as though everybody in Ontario is a supporter of the Liberal Party when that is simply not the case.

The situation is similar in BC where the Alliance won 80% of the seats with fewer than half the votes. Western Canada has gained a reputation as a Reform-Alliance stronghold. But the truth is a majority of Westerners vote for other political parties. Over the last three elections, this has also been the case in Quebec, where a minority of Quebec voters elect a majority of Bloc Quebecois MPs.

There is an alternative. Every industrial democracy but two already uses systems like Proportional Representation (PR) where every vote counts. It is time Canada did the same. PR guarantees that the number of votes a party gets in the election will determine how many seats that party gets in the House of Commons. For example, a party that receives 30 percent of the vote would receive 30 percent of the seats. Every single vote would count and no one would vote for a loser because no matter where you are in the country, your votes will go to your first political choice.

Some people object to PR because they believe that, for all its imperfections, our current system at least gives Canadians the opportunity to hold an individual Member of Parliament accountable for the decisions he or she makes. I agree that any changes should incorporate the best of the present system.

There are a number of different models in place around the world. My preferred model is already in place in 13 countries including Germany and New Zealand. In those jurisdictions, voters get two ballots, one for their local representative and one for their political party of choice. Half of the members are elected in constituencies in much the same way as in Canada. The other half are decided when

the votes for parties are counted, and a party's seat total is "topped up" with candidates from the party's lists to ensure that the party's percentage of seats in the legislature matches its percentage of the popular vote.

The candidates on the party list, and their order of importance, could be determined in a number of ways. I believe that they should be chosen as democratically as possible, through a party convention or through a kind of membership primary, in much the same way that Canadian political parties choose their leaders and their candidates in specific ridings.

PR would bring a number of benefits. It would result in better, more responsible, more grounded public policy. Because every vote would count, parties would have an incentive to tailor their policies to all regions of the country. Simply put, it would be in their interest to do so. The Alliance would have an incentive to try to win votes in Chicoutimi, Quebec. The NDP would have an incentive to try to win support in Didsbury, Alberta. The Liberals would have an incentive to try to win support in Ituna, Saskatchewan.

Moreover, if parties wanted to see at least some of their goals achieved, they would have to compromise. Governments could not simply use their majorities to ram through policies. Parties would come to see that compromise was in their own best interest, and in the interest of their voters. Voters would reward politicians who were willing to work together to achieve something, and punish those who were not. The experience in Scandinavian countries with a long history of PR suggests women and minorities would be better represented in Parliament.

This fall, Parliament is going to vote on an NDP motion to hold a national referendum on PR. The last time Parliament voted on PR was in 1923. The vote was lost, but interestingly, the most cautious Prime Minister in Canadian history, Mackenzie King, spoke out in favour of PR, during that debate. Today, the Liberal Party is preparing to choose its next Leader using PR. Canadians need to ask Paul Martin and the Liberals: If PR is good enough to elect Mr. Martin Liberal Leader and it was good enough for Mackenzie King, why is it not good enough to elect Members of Parliament?

It is time to stop using a system invented before the telephone – a system that does not respect your vote. If we do not change the way decisions are made in this country, Canadians will keep getting governments that are out of touch with their priorities. If we truly believe that every Canadian counts, we need to change the system and create a new democracy where every Canadian's vote counts.

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