



Letters

Sir:

In "Time to Move Beyond Electoral Reform Proposals" (*Review*, Winter 2009), W. Scott Thurlow raises several questions about representation and the voting system and concludes that electoral reform is less important and more problematic than other possible reforms. I would suggest that proportional representation (PR) is both a pragmatic and necessary reform for the future of democracy in Canada.

It is true that no electoral system counts 100 per cent of the votes. However, in comparing our current system which regularly leaves about half of the votes uncounted to a proportional system that counts all but (depending on the type of PR) maybe five per cent, it is clear that PR is a much fairer system of representation.

Thurlow acknowledges the unfairness of first past the post (FPTP), but argues that the system is redeemed by the way it puts geography above all other considerations of representation. Every Canadian lives in a constituency which is represented by an MP. Everyone can contact that MP with their concerns on public policy, or for help navigating the federal bureaucracy.

Surely there is more to a system of representation than this. The service MP offices provide constituents is important, but nobody's vote is decided by which candidate they think

will provide the best support for passport applications. And while the ability of constituents to express their views is part of public debate, it does not change the fact that every MP votes in the House in ways that represent the views of some constituents but not others. By sticking with a system in which each constituency has but one MP, we are saying that geography trumps all other factors of representation. The result is a system which fails to represent many Canadians' views most of the time.

Thurlow asks whether we should care about small parties. I think the question should be whether we should care about the Canadians that vote for small parties, and the answer is we should give them the same regard as those who vote for large parties. The right to representation belongs not only to the majority, but to everyone. If the House of Commons provided a fair reflection of the views of Canadians, then we could be confident that the majority could exercise its right to make decisions. But FPTP fails to provide a representative House, and therefore fails to ensure majority rule.

Small parties have, on occasion, managed to become major parties. Thurlow points to the Bloc Québécois and the Reform Party as examples. He then argues that PR may lead to the fragmentation of the Liberal party. It seems that fragmentation under FPTP (for

the BQ and Reform began with the breakdown of Mulroney's Tory party) is acceptable, while fragmentation under PR is to be condemned.

Nobody knows how the party system in Canada would change under PR, but it is reasonable to assume a slight increase in the number of parties in the House while the Liberals and Conservatives continue as the two largest parties. We can also reasonably assume that governments will be based on coalitions of parties representing a majority of seats in the House, and thereby a majority of Canadians.

Opponents of PR rarely explain their reasons for defending a system that does more to prevent than ensure majority rule.

Would PR simply shift disenfranchisement from voters for small parties to voters in sparsely populated areas? No, the best way to maximize the number of votes that count, no matter where in the country they live, no matter who they vote for is PR. Thurlow may be correct that we will have to make some exceptions for how PR works in sparsely populated areas. Again, the level of unfairness this would create is small compared to the unfairness that we currently endure under FPTP.

Thurlow's concerns about candidates being elected simply because of their place on the party list can be answered by

using a system of open lists, where votes are cast directly for candidates on the list. He completely misses the mark, however, when he criticizes the single transferable vote (STV) for privileging the votes for a third place candidate in a close three-way race. The problem he describes is one particular to the majoritarian voting system called the Alternative Vote. I agree with his criticism of AV, but it does not apply to proportional STV.

Thurlow argues that one of the advantages of FPTP is that voters understand it. In fact, few Canadians understand why there is little correlation between a party's share of the popular vote and its share of seats. FPTP regularly generates results that are counter-intuitive. Polls show that Canadians expect and want

a system where a party's share of seats is a reflection of its share of the popular vote. Furthermore, many voters feel pressured to vote strategically, yet they almost never have sufficient information to know which strategy would increase the chances of their preferred result. Voters are put in the impossible situation of trying to sort out the conflicting information they receive from various campaigns and the media about which candidates are "in" or "out" of the race. (See Dennis Pilon, *The Politics of Voting: Reforming Canada's Electoral System*, Emond Montgomery Publications, pp. 47, 137, 163) Would not it be better if we adopted a voting system where people make a sincere vote for their preferred candidate – and have that choice count – without

being pressured to make a strategic, second choice?

The suggestion that the solution to Canada's current political problems is to place some sort of limits on the principle of responsible government is a much more radical solution than PR. Why would we opt for a radical break from our constitutional process which reduces democratic accountability when we have a fair, democratic and pragmatic alternative? There is no barrier in our constitution, our federal system or our traditions that would prevent us from adopting a system of PR. Unless you wish to argue that PR would give us "too much democracy."

Bronwen Bruch
President, Fair Vote Canada