

*A Better Way in which to do Politics:
The Promise of Proportional Representation*

Submission to the Citizens' Assembly on Electoral Reform

by

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Summary:

This brief discusses the beneficial transformative effects that a properly designed system of proportional representation (PR) would likely produce if adopted in BC. The brief also addresses some of the popular misconceptions about PR. It advances two key arguments in favour of PR. First, PR would bring about a more inclusive, participatory, and democratic electoral process—in so doing, it would confer much greater legitimacy on the outcome of elections than is now the case. Second, PR would improve the quality of government and politics on the floor of the Legislature by fostering a more mature and consensual approach to the formulation of public policy.

Recommendations:

- BC should adopt a mixed member proportional (MMP) system of proportional representation, in which 1/2 - 2/3 of the members of the Legislature would be elected from single-member constituencies and the remainder would be elected from regional lists on the basis of a compensatory system of PR.
- An open-list ballot should be used for the regional lists, similar to that used in Sweden.
- Legislation should be adopted to require political parties to conduct their internal affairs, including nomination meetings, in an open and democratic manner.

Introduction

At the outset of this brief, I would like to make clear my firm belief that the single-member plurality, or first-past-the-post (FPTP), electoral system is perhaps the most unfair, anti-democratic, and dysfunctional voting system that has ever been devised. By every relevant yardstick, it compares unfavourably to electoral systems based on proportional representation. The recent Federal election campaign speaks volumes about the shortcomings of our current electoral system. According to political pundits, if the Federal Liberals won less than 40% of the vote on June 28, they faced the dreadful prospect of forming a minority government. In that case, the governing party would be obliged to take account of a wider spectrum of views than it is accustomed to doing. On the other hand, if the Liberal Party, or perhaps another party, managed to exceed the 40% threshold, it stood an excellent chance of forming a majority government. Such a government would then be in a position to ignore all other points of view for the next four years—a form of government that Lord Hailsham once described as “an elective dictatorship.” In neither case, of course, would the winning party command the support of a majority of Canadians. *It is a profoundly anti-democratic feature of our electoral system that it almost always fails to award seats to parties and candidates in proportion to their actual share of the popular vote.* Unfortunately, that means, more often than not, that representative government in Canada is something of a misnomer.

It is not my intention to dwell on the many shortcomings of the FPTP system. Many speakers have already done a good job of exposing its deficiencies. Instead, what I would like to do is to outline some of the beneficial ways in which an electoral system based on proportional representation (PR) would transform politics and government in B.C. In so doing, I will also refute some of the common misconceptions about PR that are widely held.

In this brief, I do not propose to discuss the mechanical details of a particular model of proportional representation. For the record, I favour a mixed member proportional (MMP) model similar to that used in Germany, New Zealand, Scotland, and Wales. That is to say, a system in which one-half to two-thirds of the members of the assembly would be elected from single-member constituencies while the remainder would be elected from regional lists on the basis of a compensatory system of

proportional representation. I would favour an open list ballot similar to that used in Sweden to give voters some choice in the selection of list candidates. I would also favour the introduction of legislation requiring political parties to conduct their internal affairs, including nomination meetings, in an open and democratic manner.

While my comments are framed with the MMP system in mind, they are broadly applicable to any system of PR. The main argument I would make in support of PR is two-fold:

- 1) that it would bring about a more inclusive, participatory, and democratic electoral process—in so doing, it would confer much greater legitimacy on the outcome of elections than is now the case;
- 2) that it would improve the quality of government and politics on the floor of the Legislature by fostering a more mature and consensual approach to the formulation of public policy.

These outcomes would result from the combined effect of what one political scientist has called the mechanical and the psychological effects of electoral systems. Simply stated, PR would establish a new method for translating votes into seats: one that would produce fair election results. Moreover, by establishing a new set of institutional rules for elections and for the formation of governments after the election, PR would change the behaviour of voters, parties, and politicians. I believe it would change political behaviour in BC for the better.

A More Democratic Electoral Process

The main principle of PR is that votes should be allocated to parties in proportion to their share of the popular vote. This principle gives concrete effect to a fundamental tenet of democracy: that of political equality. Under PR, all, or nearly all, votes count in the sense that they have some bearing on the political make-up of the assembly. Put differently, under PR voters can vote for the party of their choice—and, under open list PR or STV, the candidate of their choice—confident in the knowledge that their vote will be reflected in the overall party standings. Electors need not fear that by voting for a smaller party their vote would be wasted. If adopted, PR would significantly enhance the democratic quality of elections in BC. It would put all political parties on a level playing field and give voters a more authentically free choice at the ballot box. The current

system tends to turn elections into a horse race and to promote a high degree of strategic voting. It also narrows voter choice by generating pressures on smaller parties to merge with like-minded larger parties so as to minimize the likelihood of vote-splitting. PR, in contrast, would encourage citizens to vote sincerely for the party of their choice. As a result, it would make issues and the competing programmes and policies of parties the main focus of elections instead of the personality politics and strategic gamesmanship that so often dominates our election campaigns today.

Finally, PR would tend to promote higher voter turnout: indeed, the political science literature demonstrates that PR is one of several factors that account for higher rates of voter turnout in those European countries that employ it. I'm convinced that PR would boost voter turnout in BC elections, or would at least arrest the recent decline in voter turnout. It would do so in two ways: first, by making every vote count, it would relieve voters of the invidious choice they now face between wasting their vote and voting strategically—a dilemma that many voters resolve, with reluctance, by not voting at all. Secondly, PR would make elections more competitive and therefore give parties and candidates a greater incentive to solicit support in every region of the province, not just those areas in which they have traditionally had a good chance of winning constituency seats.

In Praise of Minority Government

The desirability of an electoral system must also be gauged by reference to its effect on the formation of governments and on the legislative process. The adoption of PR would significantly transform politics on the floor of the BC Legislature. The most immediate change would be to end the phenomenon of artificial majority governments. Instead, minority or coalition governments would become the norm, just as they are the normal and accepted outcome of elections in most of the democratic world. Minority or coalition governments would be a welcome development in BC politics. They would promote a more thoughtful and consensual approach to the formulation of public policy. After all, no single party would be in a position to impose its will on the Legislature without finding common ground with at least one other party. Such a bi- or multi-partisan approach is urgently needed if we are to find workable, lasting solutions to the many complex policy issues that governments must address today. No single party can

reasonably claim to have all of the answers to the economic, social, and environmental challenges that now face us. Unfortunately, the winner-take-all nature of politics in BC, fostered to a large extent by FPTP elections, promotes a good deal of rancour between government and opposition and tends to over-simplify the political choices and trade-offs that governments inevitably must make. Moreover, the power wielded by artificial majority governments puts the governing party in an unassailable position in the Legislature for a period of 4-5 years. It is partly for this reason that the Legislature, in BC and elsewhere, plays only a marginal role in shaping the content of legislation; the Legislature is also hamstrung in its ability to hold the government to account.

PR would enhance the principle of responsible government by forcing governments to pay more attention to the Legislature and to reflect a broader range of interests than those of a single party. In Sweden and Germany, both of which use PR, Parliament plays a vital role in the legislative process; this fact is reflected in the important role played by parliamentary committees. At the same time, the existence of disciplined parties avoids the kind of deadlock that often results in the US congressional system, where party lines are more fluid.

One of the enduring myths about PR is that minority governments are inherently unstable. The long experience of PR in most European countries should dispel this fear. In Europe it is typical for centre-left parties to cleave together to form a coalition after the election and for centre-right parties do likewise, sometimes on the basis of a joint programme published before the election. The bargaining strength of particular parties tends to be directly proportional to how well they did in the election—and with good reason. If voters want a centre-left coalition to move further left, they can signal that intention by increasing the popular support of left wing parties in the coalition. Similarly, if voters wish the government to take a more centrist position, they can boost the popular vote of the centrist parties. FPTP elections don't reflect the views of the electorate with that kind of precision. Indeed, it is not uncommon for parties in Canada to experience a significant increase in their popular vote from one election to the next, while still ending up losing seats or failing to win any seats at all. This fate befell the NDP in the 2003 provincial election in Ontario and the Green Party in the 2001 BC provincial election.

Needless to say, such perverse results tend to foster voter cynicism about the electoral process.

Minority governments in Canada, though few and far between in recent decades, have proven to be responsive to major currents of public opinion while also being highly productive. It is worth remembering that Medicare, the Canada Pension Plan, a new Canadian flag, and the foundations of Official Bilingualism were established during the minority Parliaments of the 1960s. The Trudeau minority government of the early 1970s produced the Election Expenses Act and made important improvements to the social security system. Most of these measures remain on the statute books to this day. It is true that minority governments, at the Federal level, have lasted for an average of only 20 months, compared with an average life-span of 50 months for majority governments. However, most minority governments in Canada met their end not because the opposition parties brought them down but because the prime minister saw his chance to call an early election in the hope of winning a majority.¹

If BC were to adopt PR, minority or coalition governments could be expected to serve their full term. After all, most of the time no party would have a realistic chance of winning a majority; therefore, it would be irrational for the premier to call an election prematurely in an attempt to secure one. Similarly, minor parties would have nothing to gain by acting irresponsibly and precipitating early elections. If anything, they would risk incurring the anger of voters, in which case they would risk losing whatever influence they already had over government policy.

Conclusion

In conclusion, BC would benefit from the adoption an electoral system based on proportional representation. Such a system would enhance the quality of political democracy and give rise to a more reasoned and thoughtful approach to the formulation of public policy.

¹ Peter Dobell, *What Could Canadians Expect from a Minority Government?* Institute for Research on Public Policy. 1:6 (November 2000), p. 9.