A Submission Suggesting

Multi-Member District Proportional Representation

To the Citizens' Assembly of British Columbia

By Stephen McCarthy

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Author's Note:

The bulk of this submission is an essay that I wrote for my Grade 11 Social Studies class. I attended the Nanaimo meeting of the Citizens' Assembly, and decided to submit my essay in full. I have added two recommendations (detailed on this page) for a concise summary. The first one is argued for in my paper, and the second is detailed by Dr. Julian West in his submission, Submission WEST-0467 (STV + Circuits). Although my examples are for Canada nationally, they are just as applicable in BC where we have a long history of seesaw majority governments.

Recommendations:

1. That BC adopt a system of multi-member district proportional representation, as detailed within.

2. That this system contain electoral "circuits," or smaller districts, having no relevance to an election, which an MP of a larger, multi-member district would represent.

Electoral Systems and Reform

There exist many electoral systems—means to elect a house of government to represent the people. None are perfect and all are unequal. To determine which system represents the fairest and most democratic way to choose a government, and to ensure the government will be effective and accountable, one must define the ideal democratic principles. As stated by the International Institute for Democracy and Election Assistance (IDEA), "The purpose of an

election is to translate the freely expressed political will of the people into a workable representative institution." A government (i) must accurately represent the population and (ii) must be able to govern effectively. The election also (iii) must not discriminate against any individual or group. Using these pillars of democracy, one can show a system of multimember districts elected by proportional representation is preferable to either a single-member-district plurality system or a strict system of national proportional representation.

Electoral Systems Discussed

This paper will compare three electoral systems as they relate to the democratic principles mentioned. A single-member district plurality system (often referred to as "first-past-the-post" or "winner-take all") is so named because each constituency elects one representative member. This member requires only a greater portion of the vote in that riding—not necessarily a majority—to win the seat.

A true, or national, proportional representation system defines the number of seats each party gets by their portion of the national popular vote. Candidates are then chosen from a party list in one of two ways. In a closed system, the party determines the ordering of this list, while in an open system, the electorate may vote for a candidate of their choice. The order of elected members within a party is given by their percent of national vote, but the party is limited to seats determined by their popular vote.

Both systems aforementioned have significant advantages and disadvantages. A third proposed system that would contain the best parts of both is the

multimember district proportional representation system. Under this system, Canada's constituencies would be amalgamated into "super ridings" of around ten members each. Their seats based upon population, these ridings would elect their designated number of representatives to Parliament, using open-ballot proportional representation to determine which members get elected.

Population Representation

The word democracy comes from the language of ancient Greece, and it translates into "rule by the people." In a representative democracy, this is interpreted as having an elected group governing with the ideals of the people; to do this the government must fairly represent the people. But what does representation mean? Should a nation strive for proportional representation—where the number of seats a party has is in proportion to its popular vote—should a state ensure fair regional representation, or should it give every constituency at least one seat in the house so each citizen has a local representative? A truly ideal democratic electoral system would have all of these factors, so the fairest must create a balance that provides the greatest amount of each.

Canada's current plurality system meets only one of the three criteria. One Member of Parliament represents each constituency, theoretically giving each citizen a say. But the representation of parties in the House of Commons is grossly unequal to their popularity among the electorate. In the 37th General Election (2000), the governing Liberal Party garnered 40.8 % of the popular vote; however, they won 57.1 % of ridings for a majority government. This is a major discrepancy of 16.3 %. Obviously this discrepancy had to come from somewhere; although the Progressive Conservative Party got 12.2 % of the vote,

they only took 4.0 % of seats in the House. Regional representation also suffers in this system—the Liberals cornered a bare majority (51.5 %) of voters in Ontario, but won 97.1 % of seats. Citizens in Ontario who voted for the Canadian Alliance, Progressive Conservatives or New Democratic Party—which along with minor parties had 48.5 % voter support—were represented in only three ridings (Elections Canada). Since a third of Canada's seats are in Ontario, 58 % of the governing party's members were elected in that province. This is representative of a major trend towards the regionalization of parties, and since a strong majority government—such as are usually created under the system—holds almost all the power in the House, the regions who elect Opposition or third parties do not get fairly represented.

A national proportional representation system would, by definition, give party seat ratios proportional to their popular vote, but it would not correct many of the problems with the single-member-district system. Whether elected by a closed or open proportional representation system, the house would not necessarily contain at least one member from each district; not all citizens would have a representative in the House. Also, candidates elected would largely be from the area of a party's greatest support, which confers regional disparity problems. If the 37th General Election had been decided using a proportional representation system where the candidates were chosen by ranking their percent of vote from their riding, the minority government Liberals would still have taken 75 out of Ontario's 95 seats (78.9 %), meaning 61.0 % of their members would be elected in this province. Apart from representing the voters on a national level, the true proportional representation system has few advantages.

So what system can truly represent the people on a constituency, regional and national level? The most advantageous and democratic system is a multimember proportional district system. Not only would constituents always have a Member of Parliament for their riding—although the ridings would be larger—but they would also have a choice of members and parties, if they wished to contact one. In a single-member district system, the Member of Parliament only represents the portion of the population who voted for him. In this proposed system, it is far more likely that a constituent will be represented by a party they voted for. Regional representation would also become more balanced and fair—ridings, especially close together, have a tendency to vote similarly. If ten ridings each barely elected a member from the same party, that region would be represented by one party—an uneven representation of its voters. If the same ten ridings were merged into a super riding, each party would only get the same share of seats as its percent of popular vote. Ontario, by this measure, would have approximately half its elected members from the Liberal Party, and the Liberals would have more balanced distribution. This ensures that the governing party—as well as Opposition parties—will be represented all across Canada, a step to ending regional disparity. The final measuring stick is national representation. If votes were randomly cast, the three systems discussed would have little difference in a 301-member house. The difference in national representation stems from the ideological nature of votes, and the tendency for many ridings to vote similarly. While in a first-past-the-post system there are no restrictions on party disparity, the multimember district system discourages or minimizes it. Due to the binary nature (win or lose) of the winner-take-all system, in a four party system there is potential for seat representation to be close to 75 % different from the popular vote. In the 37th General Election, the average vote to seat disparity was 6.1 %, which increased to 16.3 % for the governing party. (Elections Canada)

Under a multimember system, the maximum discrepancy is 10%. This would actually be much lower, probably under a 1 % gap between percent of votes and percent of seats in the house. This small sacrifice is balanced by the great gains in all areas of democratic representation.

Elimination of Discrimination

Representative democracy hinges on the principle of equality—that each citizen's vote is of equal worth. In practice, Certain systems can discriminate against this principle in order to gain other advantages. Also, electoral systems can have a profound effect on the representation of minorities and women in government. (Amy) Since these factions are citizens, they should be fairly represented also. The best electoral system gives all citizens—including women and minority groups—an equal vote and equal representation without compromising the other pillars of democracy.

Today's electoral process does not mandate discrimination but discriminates nonetheless. Constituencies are always fluctuating in population, and so an individual in a riding with less population effectively has a greater vote. Although the electoral borders are reviewed every decade, there are practical influences to the process as well as democratic ones, and these result in an unequal vote. Also, minorities and women are left vastly unrepresented. (Amy) If 10% of the population in each riding would vote for a representative of a certain ethnic minority, none of these members will be elected because none could win enough vote in his or her own constituency. Consequently, parties are much less likely to run candidates from ethnic minorities. This leaves 10 % of the population without adequate representation of their vote. This vicious cycle of discrimination applies to women in politics also; in the 37th General

Election, only 20.6 % of candidates elected were female, despite this group accounting for over half of Canada's population (Elections Canada).

To solve these problems with electoral discrimination one can turn to pure proportional representation. Ridings are not considered under this system, so every citizen has an equal vote. Under a closed proportional representation system, it is unlikely that there would be significant changes in the representation of women or minorities, as parties would list their highest candidates in order—opening the door to discrimination, not by the system, but by parties. Under an open system (where voters would choose their favourite member and their vote would count toward the party), candidates would be ranked within their party based on their portion of the national popular vote. This would force parties to put minorities and women on the ballot to get votes from varying sectors of the population, and these candidates would likely have the support of enough population nationwide to be elected. In Sweden—a country with proportional representation—43% of representatives elected were women, the highest ratio in the world (Squires et al). Nevertheless, elected members of these groups may not represent all regions from which they get their support base.

For reducing discrimination, an open-ballot proportional representation system is best; nonetheless, the multimember district system discussed would have distinct advantages over the single-member district system. Although every citizen is not guaranteed a purely equal vote, they are more fairly represented, as argued earlier. Since each district would elect around ten members, minority groups in that riding could get enough support for a candidate to represent their wishes in parliament. This Member of Parliament would represent his or her party, the minority group, and the electoral region. Since

female candidates or those from minorities would have more chance of being elected, parties would nominate these to gain support among varied groups of the population. Multimember districts take a vital step towards reducing discrimination in voting while retaining many other democratic benefits.

Effective Government

An effective government must be able to govern with the wishes of the people, and must be accountable to the people. Traditionally, the election is the time of government accountability. Differing systems have predispositions for giving either strong or weak—majority or minority—governments. Majority governments can often force through strong legislation, and have the advantage of being directly accountable to the electorate in an election. However, their legislation often only represents a minority of the population. Conversely, minority governments must often negotiate and compromise with other parties—which reflects the population better but may have weakening concessions. These governments also often form coalition governments to rule more effectively, which may distort public perception of blame between coalition members and leave responsible parties unaccountable. Finally, a government must ensure the periphery is effectively and properly represented.

"Winner-take-all" systems, as the name suggests, usually form strong majority governments. Because they are based on a plurality ballot, the government does not need the support of a majority of the population to take half the seats. In Canada, since the party system is entrenched and party discipline is the strongest among the world's democratic nations (Kilgour), the governing party often has almost total power in Parliament by virtue of winning a simple majority of seats. Legislative contributions, especially in Canada's system

today, come mainly from cabinet, while the role of a Member of Parliament is more to refine policy than to formulate it. Given that the members are direct representatives of the people and the government usually represents only half, an increase in private members' role in government would be beneficial to representing the population.

On the other end of the scale, a national proportional representation system has a tendency to produce minority governments, as the will of the people is diverse. This is far from a bad thing; governments must negotiate more with other parties and make compromises in legislation, which lead to policy more truly reflecting a balance of the electorate's views. However, a true proportional representation system has no bar for parties to win seats. In Canada's 301-seat House of Commons, parties would need to win less than one-third of one percent of the popular vote to be elected. In the 37th General Election, eight parties would have representatives, an increase of three from the plurality system. (Elections Canada) These small parties may hold a fragile balance of power and use it to their advantage; without this they can never have enough sway to pass the often one-track legislation they would like—such as the legalization of marijuana—and their presence, while democratically accurate, would only distract from affairs of state.

A multimember district system, because the seat ratio by party would diverge little from the popular vote, would also tend to elect minority governments. This confers the benefits of increased representation on each bill through greater negotiation and ensures that more citizens are represented by the actions of Parliament. History shows us that coalition governments are often stable in developed democracies, such as in Scandinavia, where some coalitions have lasted decades and formed stable, efficient governments. (Amy) Many

established democracies use a proportional or pseudo-proportional system, and the principle problems pertaining to unstable government result when too low a threshold is set for party representation and too many parties are represented. Israel, where parties need only 1% of the vote to gain representation, is a demonstration of the causes and effects of unstable government—members of over twelve parties sit in the representative house, the Knesset, resulting in a derailment of the train of government (Amy). However, having "super ridings" sets a bar for special interest groups or faux parties, while allowing minority groups to elect representatives—in a ten member district, a group would have to attract more than 5 % of the popular vote to elect a candidate. If this system were used in Canada, the five parties that have elected representatives would sustain their positions in the house, albeit with different seat ratios and more effective representation.

To create an effective government in Canada, one must consider the power and representation given to the periphery. Canada's northern Territories, in particular, do not fit in with a multimember district seat system, simply because they do not have enough seats in the House of Commons, nor enough population to democratically justify an increase in seats. However, in recognition of the increased jurisdiction of the federal government there, it would be appropriate to give each Territory another seat in the House and amalgamate them into a "super riding" to elect representatives. Because of Canada's low population density—especially in the Territories—the ability of a candidate to represent an area and its population must not be sacrificed, but balanced against the requirement for a democratically just system. In certain cases in the periphery, a multimember district system is a stretch for Members to represent their constituents, but overall it creates a better balance of regional representation within all parties.

Conclusion

To ensure the greatest adherence to the three democratic principles discussed, a multimember district system where parties win seats within the riding in proportion to their popular vote there should be used to elect candidates to a House of Government. This provides a better balance of electoral representation at the constituent, regional, and national level than either a single-member district plurality system, or true proportional representation, and provides little discrimination against women and minority groups without compromising the effectiveness of government—indeed it makes the decisions of Parliament representative of the national opinion instead of one party. No system can truly reflect all the ideals of a democratic society, but the multimember district system comes close.

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