A Baker Initiative for Canada

A New Canadian Vision

Election Reform

OVERVIEW

The following document is a proposal for a solution to flaws in the electoral process in Canada:

LET'S (NOT) HAVE ANOTHER PARTY!

A year has passed since or last provincial election and, the big questions are: what has changed, and are we satisfied with the outcome? Have we Canadians been satisfied with the performances of any of our recent governments? Does the picture look any different since administrations have changed? Reading the news and overhearing the coffee-break chatter would reveal that people are still not satisfied.

So what's wrong? Why are so many of us totally frustrated by the huge burden of the National debt, the constant aggravation of the GST, the huge loss of jobs since the inception of NAFTA, a costly and ineffectual Senate, huge expenditures for MP pensions, and fiascoes like the Softwood Lumber debacle? Local, provincial and federal levels of government continue to increase the strain on our individual pocketbooks with more taxes and surcharges. We feel that the government is irresponsible and unresponsive to the voters of Canada. Why do we have this list of woes? Are we being properly represented by our MPs and MLA's?

My theory is that we are being governed by the wrong people! That through a twist in our system we are consistently sending the wrong people to Ottawa, Victoria, or even our city council. Let me explain.

Some terms that I use may require clarification:
1. **eligible voters**. This is the number of persons in any election who are legally eligible to vote.
2. **turnout.** This indicates the percentage of eligible voters who actually did cast a ballot.
3. **Popular vote** looks at an election from the perspective of an overview rather than from the point of view of any specific seat or position. In a federal election, a party has said to have won the popular vote if more people across Canada voted for them than for any other party. A party does not need a majority (more than 50%) of the popular vote to win a majority of seats. This fact is the root of many of our political woes.

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What's wrong with the present system?

In the 1988 federal election, the Conservative Party formed a majority government by winning 153 of 295 seats in the House of Commons. A cursory look at the election statistics shows that they did not, however, win the majority of the popular vote. It's a matter of record that they actually only received "X"s from 43.2% of the people who did vote, so, "How," you may ask, "did they end up with a majority of the house seats?"

Let me briefly explain how this is possible. Simple arithmetic. For ease of demonstration, let's say that each riding has 50,000 registered voters and we get an 80% turnout. This means that in 295 ridings across Canada, we get 80% of 50,000 x 295, or 11,800,000 votes cast. Lets suppose Party "A" won a majority with, say, 153 seats. Let's further suppose that in each riding that they won, (153) they took an average of 50% (20,000) = 3,060,000 of the votes. In each of the ridings they lost (142), they averaged a little more than 35% of the turnout (approximately 14,155 each) for another 2,014,000 votes; in all, a total of 5,074,000. This represents 43% of the popular vote, and yet they won 52% of the seats. This is made possible by the vote being split among a number of parties or candidates in each riding.

At one time, our elections were simpler in that we only had two parties, the Liberals and the Progressive Conservatives (PC). In this 2 party election, if the Conservatives only get 43% of the popular vote, then they will likely win close to 43% of the seats and the remaining 57% will fall to the Liberals. Simply, the party with the most votes wins.

Enter the granddaddy of our present day NDP party, the CCF into the fight. Let's grant them a pretty good first time showing and give them 12% of the popular vote but because they get a fairly even 12 % in each riding, they fail to win any seats. Let's suppose that most of these votes come from former Liberal party supporters who see the need for the changes proposed by the CCF, but most of the PC votes stand firm with their party, leaving them with a solid 43% of the popular vote. The Liberals have shared their 57% with the CCF, are left with 45%. This makes the split between these two parties so close (43% to 45%) that it's any body's guess as to who would win more seats, and, regardless of whether the Liberals or the Conservatives won, the party that formed the government of our country would have the approval of less than half (at best, 45%) of the people!

To make it more interesting, let's suppose the fledgling CCF party had fielded very charismatic candidates in a few ridings and had actually won 4 of the 295 seats, leaving the Liberals and PCs to split the remainder with 147 and 144 seats respectively. The Liberals would form a minority government and the power would lie in the lap of the CCF party who, by siding with the Conservatives, could defeat the Liberals in the House. Our Liberal government would have to be sure that any proposed legislation was given the blessing of the CCF members creating an unfair advantage for a party that only received the nod from 12% of the people.

In recent elections, we have as many as 14 different parties, plus independents, looking for these votes. I will limit my examples to 5 parties for clarity, but please keep in mind that the more candidates running in each riding, the worse

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the situation will be. Let's use the Liberals, PC's, Reform, NDP, and NAT. The new parties have been formed because with things going the way they have been, a lot of Canadians are disenchanted with the present choices, and might even be looking for an avenue to cast something of a "protest vote".

On election day, (fictitious, of course), lets pretend that the *popular vote* looks like this:

Conservatives >>>>>>>>>>>>>>> 43%

Liberals   >>>>>>>>>>>>>>   17%

NDP   >>>>>>>>>>>>>>   15%

Reform   >>>>>>>>>>>>>>   12%

NAT   >>>>>>>>>>>>>>   13%

In this scenario, the Conservatives could easily win a big majority of seats with only 43% of the popular vote! At this point we may have a new Conservative Prime Minister reserve prime-time on your television station to tell you how the people of this country have given him an overwhelming mandate to proceed with his platform. Is it possible that he just did not notice that 57% had voted against him? In real Canadian politics, we had a very similar situation which resulted in 5 years of government that gave us GST, NAFTA and the Meech Lake Accord fiasco. Do you believe that this is what a majority of Canadian voters wanted?

Let's look at this a little closer. Let's imagine an individual riding in which there are 50,000 eligible and 5 candidates. On election day we get an 80 % turn-out (40,000 votes are cast).

They vote like this:

12,000 vote for the PC candidate

11,000 vote for the NDP candidate

7,000 vote for the Liberal candidate

6,000 vote for the Reform Party

4,000 vote for the National Party

The PC candidate wins the seat, right?

Did he get a majority of the votes? No. As a matter of fact, he received the nod from less than 25% of the eligible voters and only 30% of the actual votes cast! 70% of the voters did not choose this candidate, yet he is already packing for his flight to Ottawa! How does this represent the choice of the people? Did the majority of voters want the PC? No, and it is this basic flaw that has resulted in the overwhelming disappointment among Canadian voters about how we are governed. Clearly, the system does not work.

In a two-party election, a vote "FOR" one is effectively a vote "AGAINST" the other and the system accurately reflects the voters' desires. Add a couple of more parties and the system fails miserably. I propose that the reason is that

when more than two parties are involved, we effectively lose that AGAINST vote. I believe that in the 1988 election, there were many Canadians who were actually AGAINST the idea of having another term of Conservative government. Because our only option was to vote FOR, someone else (and actually 57% did just that) we ended up with a Conservative government anyway because that vote was split among too may choices. In the 1993 election, I believe that many Canadians decided that they would not repeat that mistake and voted Liberal as their only real hope of ending the PC's term.

Just say NO......

With this thought in mind, it is my proposal that we give the Canadian voters the right to just say NO.
How could we implement this change and what might the repercussions be?

I propose that we simply modify the ballot itself. Give each voter one "FOR" vote and one "AGAINST" vote, an easy and cost effective change to implement. The new ballot would have two peel and stick dots, one green, marked FOR, and one red, marked AGAINST, and the voter would simply put the green one beside his preferred candidate and the red one on the candidate he felt the most negative about, and that's it! This would nullify the possibility of spoiled ballots by pencil errors or people simply marking a whole bunch of "AGAINST"s on the ballot (Hmm....,not a bad idea, whoops, you heard that didn't you!). Each AGAINST vote would register as a minus 1 and each FOR vote would be a plus 1. That's it!

Lets imagine an election now, using the same statistics as before, but allowing a hypothetical AGAINST vote for each voter as well as a FOR choice.

12,000 cast their FOR for the PC candidate, and of this 12,000,

       4,000 vote AGAINST the REF candidate,

       3,000 vote AGAINST the NDP candidate,

       3,000 vote AGAINST the LIB candidate,

  and   2,000 vote AGAINST the NAT candidate

11,000 cast their FOR for the LIB candidate, and of this 11,000,

       4,000 vote AGAINST the PC candidate

       3,000 vote AGAINST the REF candidate,

       2,000 vote AGAINST the NDP candidate,

  and   2,000 vote AGAINST the NAT candidate

7,000 cast their FOR for the NDP candidate, and of this 7,000,

       3,000 vote AGAINST the PC candidate

       2,000 vote AGAINST the REF candidate,

       1,000 vote AGAINST the LIB candidate,

  and   1,000 vote AGAINST the NAT candidate

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6,000 cast their FOR vote for the REF candidate, and of this 6,000,

> 2,000 vote AGAINST the PC candidate
>
> 2,000 vote AGAINST the LIB candidate,
>
> 1,000 vote AGAINST the NDP candidate,
>
> and   1,000 vote AGAINST the NAT candidate

And, finally, 4,000 cast their FOR for the NAT candidate, and of this 4,000,

> 1,000 vote AGAINST the NDP candidate
>
> 1,000 vote AGAINST the REF candidate,
>
> 1,000 vote AGAINST the LIB candidate,
>
> and   1,000 vote AGAINST the PC candidate

Now who wins the seat? How have the voter's dislikes affected the outcome?

The PC candidate had 12,000 FOR votes and a total of 10,000 AGAINST for a result of 2,000 positive votes.

The NDP candidate had 7,000 FOR votes and a total of 7,000 AGAINST for a result of 0 positive votes.

The LIB candidate had 11,000 FOR votes and a total of 7,000 AGAINST for a result of 4,000 positive votes.

The REF candidate had 6,000 FOR votes and a total of 10,000 AGAINST for a result of 4,000 negative votes.

The NAT candidate had 4,000 FOR votes and a total of 6,000 AGAINST for a result of 2,000 negative votes.

The LIB candidate wins this seat as the most ACCEPTABLE candidate to all of the voters.

Some will cry, "Unfair! More voters chose the PCs than the LIB! They should win!"

I say that when more than two candidates are running, we must recognize the rights of the voters to reject as well as chose. In our scenario, the PCs were also the party that received 10,000 AGAINST votes, more than any other party and this is why they should not win.

Bringing this all closer to home, let's look at the federal election in my home riding, Nanaimo/Cowichan. Consider this: rough figures given to me by the IWA state that 2800 to 3000 persons living in the general area of Nanaimo are directly employed by the Forestry /Sawmill industry. Add in the members of the PPWC, and various support services for these industries as well as their family members and other voters who may be sympathetic to their specific concerns. In our next provincial election, this one block of like-minded people could conceivably vote in a candidate with a radical pro-logging platform. Likewise, their livelihoods could be in jeopardy if a radical group of environmentalists were able to muster 12,000 votes for a candidate whose intent was to greatly diminish the industry's activity in this area, with a "let them eat cake" platform. In either scenario, the big question is: would either of these candidates best serve the concerns of the majority of their constituents?

Choosing a platform......

Considering that the focus of each candidate is to get elected, how might the present system be affecting the policies and campaign tactics of each party? With 5 to 10 candidates splitting up the pie, it is political suicide to attempt to please a broad majority of voters because candidates who promise to address specific the needs of special interest groups will each be taking a share and the faction that is largest will win. The parties must campaign on more controversial and divisive issues like abortion, or free trade, the environment or unemployment. No matter which party forms our government, we are left with a situation in which a select group wins, and the majority loses because, we almost assuredly end up with a representative who is not the choice of 3 out of 4 voters!

The present system forces the parties into diametrically opposing platforms, and historically we have see-sawed back and forth between leftist and rightist governments with a huge amount of resources wasted on building and tearing down, like BC's motor vehicle testing stations, for example. We also have set up our governments with a structure that makes equal representation for all constituents a joke; a joke that no one should be laughing about!

John Doe, LIB, gets elected in Pooskapay, and Bill Smith, NDP gets elected in Spuzzum. The LIB party forms the government. Are these two representatives equal in the House? Do the voters of these two ridings receive equal opportunity and representation? The party who has the majority of seats, seeing the people's votes as sweeping mandates for their platform promptly take control of the playing field. Some of our elected officials who do not align to their particular views of this party are relegated to the strange other-world called the "OPPOSITION"! This is a rough place. None of these elected officials will ever be the Minister of Labour, or Finance, regardless of qualification! Couple this with the fact that the governing party and the opposition are probably in little agreement about anything, and you get the type of nonsense that you see on the Parliamentary channel!

Because our present voting system spawns real "opposition" of ideals, we cannot help but end up with opposition in the house. A dose of opposition is healthy in any process, but can our system of segregating our elected officials to positions of unequal status be healthy for our country? How is this affecting our progress? I feel that the criteria for appointing our elected representatives to ministerial positions should be done on the basis of merit, not patronage. Strangled with the present system, it is no wonder that the governments of this country have consistently failed to serve the united and best interests of the people.

In my newly proposed FOR/AGAINST system, supporters of diametrically opposing candidates would cancel both of them out, giving the middle of the road candidate a more likely chance for election. This tendency would force candidates to listen to their constituents and adopt policies that were more acceptable to all voters, rather than volatile opposites. This would result in the candidates coming closer together in their views and increasing the probability of agreement in the House, whether government or opposition.

Although I would ultimately propose dropping the Government/Opposition setup entirely, I believe that if we made changes to the ballot as I have described earlier, that alone would serve to cause the candidates and the parties to

move to more constituent responsive platforms and goals. Those elected would have appealed to the most voters and at the same time, offended the least. The result is that the parties forming the government and opposition should be on close to parallel courses resulting in less controversy in the house and frankly, achievement of a lot more with a lot less effort and squabbling!

We Cannot change our past, but our future lies before us, and a provincial election is not that far away. We could change the system in time to make our provincial parties re-assess their platforms and offer us some new and genuinely progressive solutions that would benefit a TRUE majority of British Columbians. It's easy to implement. Let's try it! We have nothing to loose.

If you believe that this plan has merit,

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