

FPTP Plus — An Electoral System for British Columbia

Like the rest of the country, British Columbia is in need of an electoral system that is more representative of the way citizens actually vote in elections. The current FPTP (First-Past-The-Post) system is conducive to producing majority governments, which is good for political stability, but often produces majorities that are way too inflated and thus very unrepresentative of the way citizens actually cast their ballots.

Often one hears the suggestion that we jettison the current system and replace it with a system of proportional representation (PR). But although a proportional system would be much more representative than the current system, it would end up creating too much political instability due to the rarity of majority governments under such a system.

The solution, in my view, is a combination of the two systems to create what I like to call the FPTP Plus. The FPTP Plus would enhance the democratic nature of the current electoral system by making it more representative of the actual ballot box choices of citizens, and provide an excellent opportunity to make the body politic more egalitarian and genuinely democratic.

Lets see how it would work by contrasting the seat distribution in the House of Commons produced by the current FPTP system with that of the FPTP Plus using figures from the 2000 federal election:

	Under FPTP		(%) Vote	Under FPTP Plus	
	Seats	(%) Seats		(%) Seats	Seats
Liberal	172	57.1	40.8	50.3	172
Subtotal	172	57.1	40.8	50.3	172
Alliance	66	21.9	25.5	23.1	79
B.Q.	38	12.6	10.7	11.1	38
P.C.	12	4	12.2	9.6	33
N.D.P.	13	4.3	8.5	5.9	20
Subtotal	129	42.8	56.9	49.7	170
TOTAL	301	100	97.7	100	342

The FPTP Plus works by increasing the number of seats held by opposition parties in order to reduce the winning party's majority margin of seats from an often outrageously

wide margin to a much more democratic margin of only two seats. Why only two seats? Because with the Speaker often being chosen from the government side of the Legislature, a two-seat majority is the bare minimum that best reflects the compromise between the principle of stable governance, the principle of democratic representativeness, and the principle of impartiality on the part of the Speaker. So rather than the Liberal Party having a majority margin of forty-three seats, as they won in the 2000 election with the current FPTP system, under FPTP Plus that margin would have been reduced to only two seats following the allocation of an extra forty-one seats to the opposition.

In the first phase of the FPTP Plus system, the FPTP phase, elections are still held under the rules of the current FPTP system. But immediately after the official election results are announced, the Plus phase kicks in by adding more seats to the opposition parties until together they have just two seats less than the winning party. The extra seats are assigned in priority to the opposition parties with the greatest gap between their percentage of the vote and the percentage of seats they got during the initial FPTP phase. Looking at the example of the Federal Election of 2000, we can see that the biggest gap is between the 12% of the vote and the 4% of seats the PC party received during the initial FPTP phase. This is why the Plus phase allocates many more extra seats to the PC party than to any other opposition party, an extra 21 seats. It should be noted that only opposition parties with a percentage of seats lower than their percentage of the vote would receive additional seats during the Plus phase of the FPTP Plus. This is why the B.Q. would not have received any extra seats under FPTP Plus for the 2000 election.

The extra seats provided under the Plus phase of FPTP Plus could well be filled with women, or individuals from other under-represented groups. Political parties would submit a list of candidates prior to the election being held, and depending on the number of extra seats assigned to each party during the Plus phase, those seats would be filled with the candidates listed, starting from the top of the list.

There would naturally be a lot of public pressure on political parties to include individuals from under-represented groups in their candidate lists. Using the 2000 federal election as an example, there could have been an additional forty-one women MPs in the House of Commons and thus a much greater percentage of women MPs than what has so far been produced under the current FPTP system on its own.

The rights and responsibilities of MPs elected during either the FPTP or the Plus phases of the FPTP Plus electoral system would be the same. The only difference between the two would be that while MPs elected during the initial FPTP phase would represent a mass of constituents concentrated in specifically demarcated geographical areas (constituency ridings), MPs elected during the Plus phase would represent a dispersed number of constituents not concentrated in any specific geographical area.

By-elections would be rare under FPTP Plus. When an MP would quit, die, or become incapacitated, the party he/she represents at the time would simply name the next candidate on the list to take over the job. Only in the case of independent MPs leaving politics would by-elections be held. The reason for making by-elections more rare under FPTP Plus is to preserve as much as possible the political stability provided by the current FPTP system in the new and improved FPTP Plus. For with the majority margin

reduced to only two seats under FPTP Plus, by-elections could too often cause the government to lose its majority and collapse soon afterward. It is thus important that political parties be able to replace the MPs they lose due to death, illness, or retirement with new MPs of their own. As for MPs that switch parties or decide to sit as independents, FPTP Plus would not allow their former parties to replace them...their former parties should have worked harder to keep them happy within the party fold. It would be up to the voters in the following election to pass final judgement on their MP's actions.

The question remains as to what happens when a party wins an election with more than fifty percent of the vote? Or what happens when the initial FPTP phase produces a minority? In both instances, the Plus phase will allocate as many additional seats to each party as necessary to ensure that all parties have a percentage of seats equal to their percentage of the vote. So FPTP Plus is fully proportional either when the winning party gathers over 50% of the vote, or when the initial FPTP phase fails to provide any party with an absolute majority of seats.

Now that we've looked at how the FPTP Plus electoral system would work, let's take a look at the main benefits it would produce in British Columbia:

- It would approximate the parties' percentages of seats with their actual percentages of the electoral vote, while still retaining most of the political stability inherent in the current FPTP system.
- No matter what their political persuasion, voters could rest assured that their vote would indeed count and make a difference.
- The current white-male dominance of politics could soon be eliminated with the possible election of many more women and visible minorities to the Legislative Assembly.
- The Legislative Assembly would better represent the diversity of the population of British Columbia.
- Premiers would have to start taking their backbench MLAs a lot more seriously, thus allowing those MLAs to better represent their constituents. For a Premier who would take his/her backbench for granted could suddenly find him/herself out of a majority and out of government as soon as a couple or more government MLAs decide to sit as independents or even switch parties.
- An FPTP Plus electoral system would thus make it politically counterproductive for any future Premier to concentrate too much power in the Premier's Office. Elected dictatorships, whether friendly or nasty, would become a thing of the past...something that is well overdue.