

Let's Make It Better:
A Paper in Support of
Mixed Member Proportional Representation

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Electoral Reform – Why Should We Change?

Our present system divides the country into ridings. Voters elect one rep per riding. The party with most winning reps forms the government.

So what's wrong with that?

In 2001, the Liberals obtained 98% of the seats in the provincial legislature although they received only 58% of the vote.¹

That's not fair representation.

What about the rest of us—the other 42% of the voters?

The NDP won 2 seats with their 22% of the vote.²

The Green Party with 12% of the vote got 0 seats.³

In 1996 the situation was even more unfair. The government was formed by the NDP (39 seats) who received less votes (39%) than the Liberals (33 seats and 42% of the vote).⁴

Our present system works as follows. The electoral area is divided into ridings, and voters of each riding make one choice from the list of candidates on the ballot. The candidate with the most votes wins the seat of the riding. Many voters do not choose their favourite candidate, but vote for the candidate they think stands a chance of beating the candidate they like least.

For example, in the last election I voted for the Green Party candidate. Whenever I told someone whom I planned to vote for, he or she would invariably respond “you're wasting your vote”. Because the Green Party would probably not attract enough votes to win, my friends thought that I should vote for the NDP. Otherwise the Liberals would win.

However I did not want the Liberals or the NDP to win. I wanted the Green Party to win. So, along with 2008 others in my constituency —11% of the constituency voters -- I voted for the Green Party candidate.⁵

I wonder how many other potential Green Party voters were dissuaded from voting honestly.

“Good voting systems should elicit good candidates and then reward honest voting. Voters should be motivated to vote for their true favourites

rather than feeling pressured by a bad voting system into voting for the lesser of two evils.”⁶

Our present system favours the big entrenched parties who have sophisticated campaigns and lots of money behind them—parties who can buy a lot of advertising and whose party names are bolstered by many years of political history. The Liberals have been around a long time. Also the NDP. It is hard for smaller parties and independents to get elected and one reason is because people are afraid to vote honestly for fear of “wasting their vote”.

Many people do not vote at all, especially young people, who tend to be more idealistic than the rest of us. Rather than “waste their vote”, many people simply say “why bother”, and avoid the process completely. “Voter turnout at traditional ballot box elections is declining throughout North America. While this trend is historic, a recent federal study suggests it may be at an all time low. Turnout of voters who are registered at B.C. provincial general elections has been consistent for the last two elections, however the percentage of eligible voters on the voters list continues to decline. At the 2001 general election, only 77.64% of eligible voters were registered. Turnout at that election was 70.95% of registered voters, representing only 55.09% of eligible British Columbians.”⁷

Our present system turns elections into an ugly mud slinging war. Note the proposed sample ads (not yet approved) from the National Liberal Party campaign (“If Stephen Harper was Prime Minister last year, Canadian troops would be in Iraq this year.”)⁸ Our politicians do not work together to serve the nation. They band together into large organized gangs to win, and after winning preserve their power by attacking and suppressing the ideas of their rivals. If results were more in line with people’s honest choices, we would have more parties represented in parliament. There would be more “voices” in debates, more ideas to draw from. Power would be shared, and politicians would cooperate more with each other.

Electoral Reform—How to Change

I think if we had a fair voting system, more people would show up to vote.

A new system should be simple enough for voters to learn and use accurately.

A new system should be close enough to our present one that people will accept it without fear or mistrust. Most Canadians are not very radical and would balk at too big a change.

I advocate that we try Mixed Member Proportional Representation, as advocated by Adriane Carr of the Green Party.⁹

In a Mixed Member Proportional Representation system, voters have 2 votes: one for their preferred candidate in their riding, and one for their favourite party at large. The preferred candidate votes are tabulated in the same way as our present system. The candidate with the most votes in each riding is elected, just as now. The second set of votes, for the favourite party at large, is used to elect "at large" party members from party lists. That is, the parties who win these "at large" votes choose delegates from their own lists of ready, willing and able candidates to serve in the government.

In order to make the system workable, we would have to increase the size of the ridings. Otherwise we would have twice as many politicians in the Legislature.

For example, in BC we would change the 88 ridings into 44 ridings. 44 candidates would be elected, one for each riding. The remaining 44 candidates would be chosen from the party lists, according to the percentages of the total vote the party obtained in the party ballot. If, for example, the Green Party obtained 12% of the party ballot votes, they could choose 5 legislature delegates from their party list (44 x 12%).

This system would let us choose the individual we want to represent our area, and would also give us the opportunity to choose the party platform that we want. So I could vote for the Green Party, the party of my choice, and know that my vote would help get a Green Party rep into Parliament. Even though in my constituency, the Green Party rep might not get elected.

This system, Mixed Member Proportional Representation, is now used in Germany and New Zealand.¹⁰

I recommend that we try it out here in BC. I want my vote to count. I want other voters to be encouraged to vote honestly. I want to have a fair government that truly represents the voters. I think Mixed Member Proportional Representation will provide the fairness and honesty that I desire.

Notes

- ¹ Blok, Rik: *Electoral Reform*, 2001 B.C. Provincial Election Results. <http://www.zoology.ubc.ca/~rikblok/politics/2001bc.html> I have rounded off the percentages to even numbers.
- ² *Ibid.*
- ³ *Ibid.*
- ⁴ Elections BC: British Columbia Provincial Election 1996 results. I rounded off the percentages to even numbers. <http://www.elections.bc.ca/elections/sov96/polpart.htm>
- ⁵ Elections BC: British Columbia Provincial Election 2001 results. I rounded off the percentage to an even number. <http://esm.ubc.ca/BC01/results.html>
- ⁶ Fisher, Jeff: quoted in *Science World Online*, Week of Nov. 2, 2002; Vol. 162, No. 18 , p. 280. <http://www.sciencenews.org/articles/20021102/bob8.asp>
- ⁷ Elections BC: *Voter Registration in BC, Discussion Paper, April, 2003*, p.3. <http://www.elections.bc.ca/reg/enumdiscussion.pdf>
- ⁸ Taber, Jane. *Liberals assemble attack ads* in *The Globe and Mail*, May 4, 2004, p.1
- ⁹ An excellent four page brochure *Free Your Vote* (published by the Volunteer Pro Rep Team in 2002) makes a strong case for Mixed Member Proportional Representation, giving better examples and many more details than I offer in this paper. Adriane Carr has already made a presentation to the Assembly as Proponent of the Citizen's Initiative to Establish a Proportional Representation Electoral System in BC, at the 1st Citizens Assembly hearing May 3, 2002 in Vancouver at the Wosk Centre for Dialogue.
- ¹⁰ *Free Your Vote* (published by the Volunteer Pro Rep Team in 2002).

