

Submission on Electoral Reform

I attended the 15 May meeting in Victoria and was impressed that the general sentiment seemed to be for a mixed member proportional system. The anomalies produced by our present system, most notably how certain voices representing 10 per cent, or more, of the population can be frozen out, are unacceptable to me. I suspect that people in favour of the status quo do not have their points of view consistently unrepresented in the legislative body. In some extreme cases of two party hegemony certain important policy debates fail to occur because the two parties have the same position (I am admittedly thinking south of the border here). If a position is seen to have majority support both parties will have a tendency to support it due to the pragmatics of getting elected. This does not mean that the contrary view is not important, should not be heard, or, if heard, would not lead to improved debate and resultant policy.

Generally I found the view expressed by Bryan Schwartz to be most compelling. He proposes keeping what we have and modifying it to make the end result nearly proportional. I particularly liked his point that it could be tried out with minimal disruption to our present system. There are two issues which I think need further elaboration: namely selecting the lists and the question of preferential balloting. Although both these topics were mentioned they did not receive much attention at the meeting.

1. Selecting lists

I am uncomfortable with having party lists selected by party officials. This would mean candidates could be guaranteed election without having actually to be elected. It would also create unequal classes of elected members with, presumably, members having been actually elected in ridings having greater legitimacy. Some suggestions for dealing with this (e.g. Bryan Schwartz) seem awkward to me. One idea would be to have "primaries" where the lists are selected prior to the main election. The primary would be open to every voter. In the primary voting the voter would be able to select the list for any party, but only one, and would vote for the rankings of candidates within the list. List candidates could be ranked in order, or approval voting could be used, where the voter simply indicates whether a candidate is acceptable or not, possibly up to some numerical limit of acceptable candidates. Voters who weren't interested in how the lists were selected could simply ignore the primaries.

There would still be the issue of how the candidate lists are selected. In order to avoid the problem I am trying to fix this process would have to be suitably democratic and open. Perhaps any party member could put their name forward. Or maybe there could be elections within the party.

In a system like this the list electees would have legitimacy comparable to those elected in the ridings and no awkward or artificial rules would be necessary. This would also allow for electing candidates who have broad support across the province, but no concentrated support in any riding, analogous to the rationale for proportional representation in the first place.

2. Preferential ballots

I want to strongly emphasize the insidious nature of first past the post balloting in regard to its tendency to promote negative voting. It encourages people to vote against someone rather than for someone else in an attempt to make sure the first party is not elected. To make myself absolutely clear I am thinking of the situation where I really like candidate A, but I know that A has no realistic chance of getting elected, and that the contest is really between candidates B and C. I don't think much of B, but I really don't like C, and so I end up voting for B to prevent C from getting elected. With the MMP method this would still be a problem unless preferential balloting is used to elect the riding candidates. Note that voters who chose not to rank candidates could still vote simply by putting an X next to their preferred candidate. This would be equivalent to putting a 1 and leaving the rest unranked. In fact voters could rank any subset of candidates if they so chose. In conjunction with selecting candidates from lists it would be essential to use preferential balloting for the riding candidates and electors first preferences for determining those electees from the lists.

Thank you for your work on this extremely important matter. If further elaboration on any points I raise is needed please let me know.

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