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NOW IS THE TIME FOR A FUTILE GESTURE Monty Python

I hate to rain upon the parade of all those good citizens who are currently insisting that everyone should get out and vote, that to do so is my civic and moral duty. After dutifully obeying this insistence for over fifty years, I have finally reached the point where it is clear to me that, in many cases, my vote has been rendered futile by our ludicrous 'first-past-the post' system of counting votes. So why continue with an exercise in futility, especially if, by doing so, I lend support to a corrupt system?

I accept the fact that a major part of my problem has been my penchant for voting for candidates and parties which do not enjoy wide support from my fellow citizens. I am told that in most ridings, a vote for the so-called fringe parties is a wasted vote, and that I ought to vote strategically; that is, vote for the best of a very bad lot, in order to avoid the triumph of the worst. Hence, for much of my life, I have been instructed to vote for either the Liberals, in order to keep the Conservatives out of office, or for the Conservatives, in order to punish the Liberals. Unfortunately, I am neither rich, nor a corporate executive, nor a fool, so it makes no sense whatever for me to vote for either of those parties. And since, in the riding in which I currently reside, neither the New Democrats nor the Green party have any chance of winning, voting for either is quite futile.

I used to think that voting was a duty, and that, even if my choice of candidate did not win, I would swell the popular vote for the party and the policies I favoured. But with the first-past-the-post system, the popular vote is quite irrelevant. In extreme cases, if there are four parties in the race, the winner can triumph with only 26% of the vote, and as far as the gentlemen of the media are concerned, winning is all that matters, so that is all they report. Hence over the years we have often had parties ruling our nation with only about 40% of the popular vote, but graced with 60% of the seats in parliament as a result of first-past-the-post system. On the provincial scene, we have had parties supported by a smaller proportion of the popular vote than their opponents, but winning a healthy majority of seats in the legislature. In British Columbia in 1996, the NDP received 39% of the popular vote, but 52% of the seats; the Liberals received about 43% of the votes, but only 44% of the seats. And at other times, we have had parties winning 60% of the popular vote, but 95% all of the seats in the legislature, so that 40% of the voters enjoy virtually no representation. This kind of system is, I submit, a ridiculous parody of democracy.

In this federal electoral campaign of 2004, unless I vote either Liberal or Conservative, my vote is wasted and my effort to obtain representation in parliament is futile. So why should I vote?

The remedy, of course, is to chuck the current system in favour of one which awards a

proportion of the seats in the legislatures to each party in accordance with the proportion of the popular vote each party has achieved in the election. Most democratic nations have adopted this practice. The exceptions, of course, are those which have based their systems on that of the old mother of parliaments in Britain. As far as I know, New Zealand is the only English-speaking member of the former British empire which has adopted proportional representation. The proportional system leads to a greater variety of parties in parliament, as befits the variety of opinions which actually exist in the electorate. Since it is rare for any party to capture the majority of the popular vote, coalitions are necessary, and more frequent elections are required if the government loses the favour of its coalition members. But this is democracy.

The problem, of course, in moving to proportional representation, is that no government in power is likely to acquiesce to a system which might diminish its power. The New Zealand example is a rare occasion where logic and fairness triumphed over immediate party interest. The situation in British Columbia is interesting, since the current government was able to win 95% of the seats by capturing 65% of the vote. It has since set up an electoral commission of randomly selected private citizens to explore appropriate changes in the electoral system of British Columbia. It will be interesting to observe whether the rational basis for proportional representation will prevail over the vested interests of the expert advisers to the commission, and ultimately of the current government. But the possibility of losing power in an election through changes in the electoral process does concentrate the minds of government members wonderfully. Don't count on any significant changes in time for the next provincial election..

In the mean time, I suspect that I shall not bother to vote in this federal election, in spite of all the pleas and imprecations directed at those who refuse to do their civic duty. There is currently great concern among pundits regarding the steady decline in voter participation, and strident appeals that something be done to correct it. These demands are short of remedies, but an obvious one would be a switch to proportional representation.

I will admit that my resolve to abstain from voting might waver as election day approaches, towards a vote for the Green Party, simply because I am bloody-minded enough to resent the determination of the media to totally ignore that party. But since the same media studiously avoids any post-electoral mention of the popular vote percentages, in favour of hyper-ventilating about the seats each party obtains, why bother. This is my country, and I worry about its future, but I cannot see that this is the time for a futile gesture. So the hell with voting!

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