

Electoral Reform Viewpoint by James Sadlish

Our present First Past the Post (FPTP) voting system does not represent the electorate as equitably as proportional systems. Legislative seat distribution has not been proportionate to voters' wishes. The following suggestion is for a voting system which requires minimal changes to our electoral process but will give greater proportionality to government.

For the process of electing a Provincial government, this electoral reform proposal gives proportionality among those qualifying parties reaching a specified threshold of popular support. To achieve greatest proportionality the whole Province would form one electoral district or constituency (except possibly for a second First Nations constituency). The one seat ridings defined by our present system could generally remain the same, not as constituencies, but as electoral "regions" within the one Provincial constituency. Parties would enlist candidates, one for each single seat electoral region, similar to the present FPTP ridings. Voters would vote for candidates who may live in the region or are designated by a party to run in the region and if elected would represent the region in the legislature. Ballots would show a list of candidates running for the regional seat and each candidate's party affiliation. Voters would have one vote only for one candidate. A vote for a candidate would also be a vote for the candidate's party.

Proportional representation would be determined by percentage of the popular vote. Those parties who receive a percentage of the popular vote (through votes for their candidates) over a prescribed threshold would be assigned a number of government seats proportional to their Province-wide popular vote. Parties not reaching the threshold of required votes would not be awarded seats. Seats would be allotted to parties in the same ratio as the popular vote between the qualifying parties (votes for parties not meeting the threshold would unfortunately be "wasted"). Once the number of seats for each party is determined, candidates are selected by the percentage of their popular vote. Party candidates ranked with the highest percentage of popular vote, Province-wide, would be awarded the designated party seats.

Independent candidates would not be required to meet the threshold and consequently may receive a higher popular vote than some qualifying party candidates. In this case they would be awarded a government seat, thereby reducing the total seats available to parties. Independents, not having to contend with the threshold requirement, would be considered in the proportional allocation of government seats if their popular vote percentage was significant.

To ensure proportional representation for First Nations voters, a government implementing electoral reform would dedicate one or more seats to their winning candidate(s) in equivalent proportion to First Nations population within British Columbia. The establishment of a separate First Nations constituency may be the most effective means of directing First Nations votes to elect candidates to the dedicated seats. First Nations voters would have the option of choosing which of the two constituencies in which to participate. Candidates running in the First Nations constituency would also be subject to a threshold limitation. If there was one seat only, dedicated to First Nations representation, votes would be counted just as in our present FPTP system. With two or more seats the more proportional method detailed above could be applied, designating a region for each seat.

Women and ethnic minorities have been under-represented in Canadian Federal and Provincial governments. Without legislated requirements or incentives directed toward political parties to enlist more women and minority candidates thereby improving equity in government, voters must

direct their votes to parties promoting women and minorities. In a proportional electoral system all factions of society will theoretically be better represented than in the FPTP system. However, party policy on this issue ultimately remains the real determinant factor influencing equitable representation.

Points to consider regarding this proposed near-proportional single vote system:

- 1) Percentage of the popular vote may not be perceived as the best method to determine how candidates are ranked. Ideally, the vote count for each candidate would be preferable. However, electoral regions (ridings in the present system) seldom have equal numbers of registered voters. Candidates in regions with a larger number of registered voters would have an unfair advantage over candidates in regions with fewer registered voters. If all electoral regions had approximately the same number of registered voters, the actual votes per candidate could be the best method to rank them.
- 2) An alternative method to calculate the ranking of regional candidates within the larger constituency, where the numbers of registered voters in each region are considerably varied, is to adjust actual votes cast in each region by a co-efficient to give votes for candidates from all regions equal weight. This co-efficient would be calculated as a ratio between the number of registered voters within a region and the average determined by the total number of registered voters in the Provincial constituency divided by the number of voting regions (or seats). If a region has less than the average number of registered voters its co-efficient would be greater than one. If a region had more than the regional average its co-efficient would be less than one.
- 3) The percentage of the popular vote is determined by the ratio between the valid votes for a candidate and the total number of valid votes cast within the electoral region. The number of registered voters are not considered in the calculation nor are rejected ballots. If regional boundaries were drawn so that each region had approximately the same number of registered voters, actual votes cast for each candidate would determine their ranking.
- 4) The rationale for regions within a greater constituency is to give residents of each region a representative in government closely associated with their area, either living nearby or well known in the region. Candidates would concentrate their community efforts within the region of their electorate and not over a larger constituency as in other proportional systems. Having one seat per region eliminates the competition arising between members of the same party in multi-seat ridings. People casting votes for a candidate who is not elected have, at the same time, indicated which party they support and so their vote will count in determining the proportionality of party seats in government.
- 5) As the single constituency or electoral district is the entire Province (except perhaps for a second First Nations constituency) and because candidates are elected on the basis of their percentage of the popular vote, it is possible that some electoral regions may not have any candidates elected and others may have more than one elected representative. Residents in regions without elected representation may request the services of elected MLAs in adjacent electoral regions, or these regions could be assigned an elected official from another region with two MLAs.
- 6) The cost to implement this proposed single vote near-proportional system would be minimal. Calculations to determine party proportionality and candidate ranking are simple. Electoral regions would be essentially equivalent to our present constituencies so electoral boundaries would not require alteration (although regions with equal numbers of registered voters would be

preferable). The system could function with the same number of legislative seats (although a small number could be added to accommodate a First Nations constituency).

7) This proposed electoral system would fairly represent the wishes of a majority of British Columbia voters on voting day. Granted that votes cast for some parties not meeting the required threshold would not translate into proportional representation. However, the threshold provides a necessary tool to the government implementing a near-proportional electoral system to regulate the entry into government of very small fringe parties and frivolous or radical parties which do not have wide voter support. This threshold may require subsequent adjusting if it is found to be too restrictive. Permitting small parties to form coalitions in order to reach the threshold, would increase proportionality.

8) Most proportional systems employ party lists to facilitate the proportional aspect of a mixed electoral system. Under list systems candidates on party lists are seldom directly elected by voters. Lists give greater advantage to parties and less control of choice to the electorate. References on electoral reform state that lists provide parties the opportunity to increase the representation of women and ethnic candidates. It ultimately remains the party's choice, under the list system, whether or not under-represented candidates are included on the list. Conversely, under a single vote near-proportional system, the electorate makes the clear choice of preferred candidates with a voting method that is entirely transparent and uncomplicated.

9) The single vote method is used with this proposed near-proportional system to keep the voting process straight-forward. Systems which require more than one vote may invite the practice of strategic voting, skewing electoral voting results.

10) The proportional system presented here is a novel approach to giving (most) voters a local representative yet all votes count within the greater, Province-wide constituency to determine party seats and the election of candidates. The Provincial constituency is multi-seated but candidates are based within their regions. This method does not fit into any published classification of proportional systems, however, it undoubtedly gives voters proportionality, it is simple and inexpensive to implement, and it does not require radically changing our present legislative structure.

Political parties and political scientists may prefer a more sophisticated proportional system. Many proportional voting systems incorporate somewhat complicated electoral formulas which, although comprehensible, may limit regular scrutiny by the majority of the electorate. A more sophisticated system, introduced initially, may give a governing party more leeway to legislate future minor adjustments to refine the electoral process without raising much public attention. From a voter's perspective, however, the more straightforward and transparent the electoral system is, the greater will be the participation by registered voters in the electoral process.