

## PRESENTATION TO CITIZENS' ASSEMBLY: Id: MEIJER-1118

In a representative democracy citizens are sovereign and delegate part of their responsibility to make political decisions to elected representatives.

Therefore the method chosen to elect these representatives is critical in regard to the legitimacy of the elected government.

The Canadian system of "First Past The Post" or "Winner Take All" was designed for a society with homogeneous districts and a two party system. This was the case a century ago in the United Kingdom.

Once significant migration took place and additional parties emerged, the system resulted in significant distortions. The distribution of seats in Parliament no longer resembled the popular vote, which is the expression of the political will of the voters.

These distortions increasingly undermine the legitimacy of the elected government.

An additional significant failure of the current system is that the ballots of all the voters who did not vote for the winning candidate in a district are no longer counted toward representation in Parliament.

With four parties running the winning candidate could have been awarded the seat with as little as 26% of the votes cast. In other words, 74% of voters are deprived of representation and that offends against the profound principle of "No taxation without representation!"

These problems are inherent in any system that relies exclusively on districts to elect members of Parliament.

The only way out of this is to follow the example of the overwhelming majority of democracies in the world and adopt an election system of proportional representation. The essential aspect of any PR system is that the distribution of seats in Parliament equals the popular vote. In other words, all votes cast count toward representation in Parliament.

There is no question about the fact that such system is more democratic. Why then has it not been adopted by Canada already?

Clearly there are people who continue to support the current system.

Following are some of the most common arguments in favour of our “First Past The Post” system and their refutations:

01. TRADITION: The current system has been in place since Confederation and is part of our heritage etc. etc.

Some traditions are indeed worth keeping but others such as slavery and the subjugation of women are not. Considerations of tradition should not persuade us to maintain a grossly inadequate election system.

02. STRONG GOVERNMENT: Although it may be grossly unfair, the system at least provides a convincing winner and strong government etc. etc.

This is simply not the case as the most recent federal election has shown. There have been several minority governments in the past as well. Furthermore it makes little sense to have a majority government that is in fact rejected by the majority of the voters. Such government has strength at the expense of the political preference of the majority of the electorate. A related concern is the frequency of elections. In fact political scientists have determined that elections in PR countries are no more frequent than in Canada and that PR provides governments that are overwhelmingly equally stable.

03. LOCAL REPRESENTATION: Voters are able to elect someone they know and who is part of the community etc. etc.

Actually Canada has the worst of both worlds! We endure distortions in the results in favour of having a local representative. However, as soon as such person takes his seat in Parliament he will follow the party platform even if most of his constituents oppose it. There is good reason to have the position of “Party Whip” in parliament!

Furthermore, under PR it is clearly in the interest of any party that wants to be re-elected to have all regions represented among its candidates and to provide competent persons.

A notorious problem with our FPTP system is the deliberate changing of district boundaries to favour the governing party. Such gerrymandering is non-existent with a PR system. Even the legitimate changes in boundaries from time to time to reflect demographic changes is always very much behind the actual time of such changes. Last, but certainly not least, this concern can be alleviated by adopting a Mixed Member PR system, successfully in use by Germany and New Zealand. I will come back to this later.

04. FPTP avoids too many parties etc. etc.

Sweden with a PR system has about seven parties while after the election of 1992 in B.C. there were eight parties (including independents) represented in the Legislature.

Under PR there may be more parties but there are only two or three large enough to form a meaningful coalition. The others still have an opportunity to be heard and that is what democracy should be about! Finally, the number of parties can be constrained by establishing a minimum threshold of 4% or 5 % of the popular vote to qualify for seats in the Legislature.

There are other arguments but upon closer scrutiny they can also be refuted. Following are some points in favour of PR.:

01. ALL VOTES MATTER! MORE FAIR TO VOTERS AND PARTIES.
02. VOTER TURNOUT IS HIGHER BY UP TO 15%.
03. VOTERS HAVE MORE REAL CHOICE. NO NEED FOR STRATEGIC VOTING. THE ALLOCATION OF SEATS IN THE LEGISLATURE IS A MORE ACCURATE

REFLECTION OF VOTES CAST AND OF POLITICAL DIVERSITY.

04. GOVERNMENT BY CONSENSUS AND POSITIVE COMPROMISE RATHER THAN FOUR YEARS OF "DICTATORSHIPS."

Because of the concern by many British Columbians about local representation it would be an ideal solution to adopt the Mixed Member Proportional System. Electors will get two votes on their ballots. One is for their preferred party and it will determine the distribution of seats on a proportional basis. The other is for a local candidate who may or may not be of the same party. Half the seats will be filled by these locally elected members on a FPTP basis. The other half of the seats will be used to make sure that parties will reach the proportion of seats they are entitled to as a result of the popular vote, by allowing them to top up the locally elected members from party lists. If there is great concern about local representation, the number of seats elected locally could be raised from half to 60% or even 70%, leaving only a smaller percentage to be picked from party lists. A number of other adjustments are possible to meet other desired goals. The key point is that the eventual seat distribution closely matches the popular vote, while still allowing for locally elected candidates. The best of both worlds and a system that the Assembly ought to consider seriously!

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