

Introduction

The New Landscape of Canadian Democracy

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Much has changed in the real world of Canadian politics since the Strengthening Canadian Democracy project was initiated in 1999. Events of the final weeks of 2003 capped notable developments in the making for some time. Paul Martin became the country's twenty-first prime minister, his ascension to that position marked by the unprecedented step of a political party ousting a sitting PM. Meanwhile, the Canadian Alliance — itself having experienced internal turmoil, a caucus revolt and a change of leadership — persuaded the Progressive Conservative Party, after a lengthy courtship, to join forces in a new united party of the Right. Several months later, that new party mounted a surprisingly strong challenge in the June 2004 federal election, wresting enough seats from the reigning Liberals to produce the country's first minority government in over twenty years.

These developments are indicative of the restive quality of contemporary Canadian politics, of a widespread thirst for renewal — in ideas, in leadership — and an appetite for bold corrective measures. Alongside this agitation and turbulence, however, is another manifestation of the changing temper of the times, a significant disengagement from politics among the electorate at large. Much consternation was expressed when voter turnout fell to 61.2 percent in the 2000 federal election, the lowest level ever at the time. If the dominance of the Liberal Party and uncompetitive elections seemed partly to blame, the consistent and often sizeable decline in turnout in recent provincial elections, whether in Nova Scotia, New Brunswick, Ontario, Quebec or Manitoba (where

only 54 percent of eligible voters turned out to cast a ballot in the most recent provincial election), suggested the disaffection ran deeper than this. The 2004 federal election confirmed these suspicions. Despite a lively campaign and a contest too close to call, only 60.5 percent of Canadian voters showed up to cast a ballot on June 28, a new nadir and a clear signal that vibrant elections alone will not suffice to rekindle political spirit among disengaged Canadians.

New Openings

As turnout numbers have declined amidst tumult in the party system, another change has slowly been taking form: governments and policy-makers are beginning to think seriously about ways to reinvigorate Canadian democracy. Following the 2000 election, Canada's chief electoral officer Jean-Pierre Kingsley indicated that reversing the decline in voter participation was an important priority for his office. His initial musing was that Canada might want to consider making voting mandatory, as a handful of countries around the world already does. More recently, the CEO's office has been probing the sources of the problem, expanding its research efforts to investigate key demographic groups who vote in low numbers, such as young adults and Aboriginal Canadians,¹ as well as considering technical improvements and innovations to facilitate voting, such as on-line voter registration.²

Various provinces have also been taking steps to rejuvenate democracy in their jurisdictions. British Columbia is furthest along in amending traditional democratic practices and procedures. Provisions for recall of members of the Legislative Assembly and for citizen-initiated referendums have been in place since 1995. The election of Gordon Campbell's Liberal government in 2001 has seen the introduction of other innovative measures. The first is fixed election dates. Henceforth BC will hold elections every four years on the nose rather than allowing the premier to pick the date. The second is the recent convening of the Citizens' Assembly on Electoral Reform, which is deliberating on the merits of alternative electoral systems and will put its recommendation for reform to the voters of British Columbia in a referendum that will accompany the next provincial election. The exercise is attracting national and international attention as the first where a government has coupled innovative techniques in deliberative democracy to direct democracy for binding decision on an important public policy issue.

Quebec has recently been building on a rich tradition of debate on the merits of different democratic procedures by undertaking a wide-ranging exploration of reform options in the past couple of years. This culminated in the convening of the Estates General on the Reform of Democratic Institutions

in February 2003, which attracted over 1000 delegates, who gathered to discuss a broad gamut of issues raised in earlier public meetings held around the province. Unlike many initiatives that lose steam with a change in government, the momentum for democratic reform has not faltered since the election of Jean Charest's Liberal administration in April 2003. Of the various ideas on the table, the new government is pressing ahead most forcefully with electoral reform, promising legislation in 2004 that will introduce an element of proportional representation to Quebec's electoral system.

Other provinces are also considering whether a change to proportional representation might be for the better. After a number of lopsided election results, the government of PEI appointed a one-person Commission on Electoral Reform in January 2003 to consider the matter. Retired Chief Justice Norman Carruthers submitted his report in early 2004. While cautioning that more work needed to be done to engage and inform the citizens of PEI about the subject, and that a referendum would be the appropriate means of sanctioning any change, Carruthers did underline the merits of a mixed-member proportional system that would combine single member districts with top-up seats awarded to candidates from party lists.³ Developments elsewhere also caught the commissioner's attention, prompting the recommendation that "a Prince Edward Island version of British Columbia's Citizen Assembly be used in this province to formulate a question for a referendum."⁴

Meanwhile in New Brunswick work has begun on Premier Lord's pledge during the 2003 provincial election campaign to reconsider any number of elements of the democratic system in that province. The Commission on Legislative Democracy has been established, its mission "to identify options for an enhanced citizen-centred democracy in New Brunswick."⁵ Areas up for consideration include the electoral system, referenda, fixed election dates and an enhanced role for MLAs. Broad-based public consultation will help shape the recommendations that are to be submitted to the premier by December 2004.

Ontario, under the new leadership of Dalton McGuinty's Liberal Party, is similarly promising intensive investigation and public consultation in the near future on ways to make democracy work better in Canada's largest province. McGuinty has named a minister responsible for democratic renewal and created a secretariat to support his efforts. Elements of the system that will be scrutinized for possible reform include rules governing political financing, the electoral system and the role of MLAs. Also to be considered is the potential use of citizen juries to deliberate on policy issues (a technique akin to the Citizens' Assembly in BC but on a smaller scale).

At the federal level there have also been new initiatives and proposals. Principal among these is Bill C-24, which has established new rules for party

finance that strictly limit donations from corporations and trade unions and provide for enhanced funding from the public purse. Other changes have come, or have been promised, in the area of parliamentary reform. In 2002, Parliament voted in favour of a new method of selecting committee chairs — a vote by committee members rather than selection by the prime minister. An attempt was also made to establish an independent ethics commissioner, but the relevant bill failed to pass into law before the dissolution of Parliament in November 2003. This was, however, among the items in the package of parliamentary reform that Paul Martin unveiled early on his campaign for the Liberal leadership and so will presumably materialize again, along with other promised changes, such as more free votes in the House of Commons and parliamentary review of government appointments.⁶ There will undoubtedly be considerable pressure on the prime minister to deliver on these reforms and to consider others that may have escaped his attention.

Few would have foreseen five years ago that the very infrastructure of democracy would today be the most active area of public policy deliberation and innovation in this country. The traditional thinking was that political leaders would be reluctant to alter the structures and processes that had delivered them to power and afforded them ample rein to govern by their own lights. Countering that wisdom, any number have been boldly striking out in new directions, indeed unleashing forces — commissions, citizen assemblies, public consultations — that may, for better or worse, usher them ahead in directions and at a pace not entirely of their own choosing. It is truly one of the more striking developments in recent Canadian politics.

If the perceived urgency of the issue is one reason why politicians have taken up the cause in earnest, another development may have helped pave the way. The receding significance of the dominant political issue in Canada for much of the last four decades, national unity, has created an important vacancy on the public agenda. While it would be folly to declare the sovereignty movement in Quebec moribund — reports of its demise have proven to be premature time after time in the past — there can be no doubt that we are in the midst of a significant lull that has gradually settled over the province. If the atmosphere of relations was tense following the dramatic near miss of the 1995 referendum and the bitter debates engendered by the 1998 reference case on Quebec secession, the Supreme Court's capacious decision provided a measure of closure to at least one dimension of the debate, while the decline in PQ popularity allowed for the election of a new government more strongly committed to the Canadian federation than any other of the past several decades. The current context provides an opportunity not seen for many years to engage in reflection on fundamental issues other than our continued existence as a country.

This is not to say that earlier periods were entirely devoid of debate about the merits of Canadian democracy. Pressure for change often emanated from the West, where distance from the centres of economic and political power in Central Canada and a populist political culture produced periodic disaffection that partly manifested itself in calls for democratic reform. The federal election of 1921 saw the arrival in Ottawa of 65 MPs representing the fledgling Progressive Party, pressing for electoral and parliamentary reform. The party's success proved to be short-lived — its refusal to take up the mantle of Official Opposition or observe the conventions of party discipline contributed to its undoing — but it did represent an early expression of disquiet with some the settled assumptions of Canadian democracy. Western Canada was also, in the years between the wars, the site of considerable experimentation with different electoral systems — the alternative vote, the single transferable vote — at both the municipal and provincial levels (Manitoba, Alberta and Saskatchewan).⁷ By the early 1950s, however, enthusiasm for these alternatives had abated and virtually all jurisdictions had reverted to single-member-plurality voting.

In the postwar period other sorts of changes materialized throughout the country, as some of the mechanisms of electoral democracy came under scrutiny and were updated to ensure fairer political competition and representation. Beginning in the 1950s, attention was focussed on inequities in the size of electoral constituencies, which led to the gradual introduction across the country of statutory requirements for redistribution by independent bodies that would reduce disparities between ridings while remaining sensitive to the effective representation of particular communities.⁸ In recognition of the importance of money in the political process and its potentially nefarious effects, the *Canada Elections Act* (1974) introduced rules governing political contributions and spending aimed at both parties and other groups that might seek to influence the political process, as well as providing public funding for parties and candidates. Political patronage, that traditional lubricant of Canadian politics, also came under increased scrutiny and was, if not entirely exorcised from the political system, certainly trimmed back. All of this amounted to important democratic housekeeping, designed to clean up the system to ensure a more level playing field and greater integrity in government operations; it was not, however, so obviously designed to address the popular desire for a greater voice in government — a citizen-centred democracy, to borrow a phrase — that seems to underwrite much of the current angst and that might require more far-reaching changes.

When broader issues of structural reform arose in the postwar period, they were usually, in keeping with the priorities of the time, couched in the context of the national unity debate. Enhancing the democratic quality of political institutions could, it was argued, open up channels of voice and influence in

Ottawa for aggrieved regions of the country, thereby soothing regional tensions. So it was that the Pépin-Robarts Task Force on Canadian Unity, reporting in 1979, identified as one of the main benefits of proportional representation the assurance it would provide that all regions of the country would be adequately represented in the federal caucuses of the parties in Ottawa.⁹ Similarly, Senate reform — often part of the mix whenever leaders gathered to discuss constitutional matters and an integral element of the Charlottetown Accord — was typically conceived as a means of tackling at once the democratic dysfunctionality of an appointed upper house and the inadequacy of regional representation at the federal level.

On one occasion, however, a significant audit of Canadian democracy was undertaken in its own right. The Royal Commission on Electoral Reform and Party Financing, chaired by Pierre Lortie, was appointed in 1989 and delivered its final report in February 1992. The “National Question” still hung over the proceedings. This was, after all, a time of intense constitutional debate and negotiation, marked by the unravelling of the Meech Lake Accord and the prolonged reconstitution efforts that eventually produced the Charlottetown agreement. But if the commission’s work was overshadowed at the time by events of greater immediate consequence, it has stood the test of time as a thoughtful body of research and analysis that produced a wealth of recommendations dealing with matters of technical detail around the conduct of elections as well as larger issues, such as the representation of disadvantaged groups in elected bodies. Continued momentum for some of these ideas has come from Canada’s chief electoral officer, who has had occasion over the past dozen years to draw upon the unfinished business of the Lortie Commission — recommendations never acted upon — in fashioning his postelection counsel to Parliament on ways to improve Canadian electoral democracy. The work of the Lortie Commission is, then, one important point of departure and a useful touchstone for current debates about ways to strengthen the democratic fabric in Canada.

For many, however, the ideas originating in officialdom have tended to focus on the finer points of democratic procedure, failing to probe larger questions around the basic design of our political institutions. The Lortie Commission for example, despite its formal title — the Royal Commission on Electoral Reform and Party Financing — did not consider whether the voting system itself might be changed, focussing instead on other elements of electoral democracy. Voices from outside the traditional corridors of power and from various points on the political spectrum began agitating for more, gradually coalescing over the course of the 1990s into a broad coalition of disparate groups united in their concern for the state of Canadian democracy. The Reform Party can be credited with lending the cause important early momentum in the latter part of the

1980s, with its populist-inspired program of democratic reform. Besides putting Senate reform back on the agenda, Preston Manning's Western-based organization championed the causes of direct democracy and an enhanced role for individual members of Parliament. Civil society was active in the cause as well, in the form of advocacy groups, academics, think tanks and the media, which, each in their own way, endeavoured to widen the range of options under consideration and provide forums for public deliberation and debate. Democracy Watch, an Ottawa-based watchdog founded in 1993, focused public attention on the inadequacy of mechanisms to ensure transparency and accountability in government. Fair Vote Canada more recently joined the fray as a national grassroots organization that has complemented the efforts of provincially based groups pressing for change to the single-member-plurality electoral system. As the cause in its various guises gained credibility and adherents, political parties aside from Reform started to take note and develop their own positions on the question of democratic reform. At the federal level, all the opposition parties — the NDP, Bloc Québécois and even eventually the Progressive Conservatives — added commitments to their programs to examine or implement such changes as proportional representation, citizen-initiated referenda or relaxed party discipline. They were joined by parties at the provincial level, including some in opposition who fashioned a democratic reform agenda that helped carry them into office (the Liberals in BC and Ontario) and others in power who recognized it as an issue worthy of serious consideration (the Conservatives in New Brunswick and the Parti Québécois).

So it is that pressure from below and pliability up above have come together at this juncture to put items of genuine significance squarely on the agenda. The venerable single-member-plurality electoral system is being seriously scrutinized in various quarters. The wisdom of stringent party discipline is coming into question. Allowing citizens to decide important policy questions on a more regular basis through the mechanisms of direct democracy is being contemplated. The innovative methods sometimes being used to explore these areas of reform exemplify the new willingness of governments to embrace public participation and deliberation. The BC Citizens' Assembly is the most notable example, but Quebec's Estates General also succeeded in bringing a broad coalition of citizens into the policy-making mix. Other provinces look likely to follow suit in the methods they will use to arrive at their recommendations for reform. It is difficult to imagine with the expectations that have been generated that the better part of the reform agenda will not come to fruition; or that the contagion of democratic renewal, once discussion and debate give way to actual reform, will not come to infect those parts of the country that have thus far proven resistant.

Broader Debates

But it is still early days with much discussion of alternatives yet to take place. For commentators, the fluidity of the current context presents both a risk and an opportunity: the risk of putting into print analysis and reflection that will quickly be outpaced by events, which is, however outweighed by the opportunity to intervene at an auspicious juncture and help influence debates as they unfold. From its inception the Strengthening Canadian Democracy project has endeavoured to provide a forum where various commentators, academic and otherwise, could draw upon their expertise to highlight critical issues and outline options for constructive democratic reform. If it has served this purpose to date, our hope is that it can contribute further by bringing together some of the earlier published work in this collected volume.

The project took two postulates as its starting point: judging by voter turnout levels and the disaffection with government captured by public opinion surveys, all is not well with Canadian democracy; and in seeking to reconnect Canadians with their political system, institutional remedies are likely to be the simplest and most effective. This institutionalist assumption is not shared by all who ponder the question of democratic disengagement. Some of these alternative viewpoints originate outside Canada, in countries that have also experienced a rising tide of democratic disaffection in recent times. The best-known is Robert Putnam's account of the American case in his book *Bowling Alone*. Surveying the broad sweep of American history, with special emphasis and a welter of statistical evidence on the period since the early 1960s, Putnam contends that negative attitudes toward government and declining political participation are but two elements of a broader pattern that has seen Americans retreating from community life in all its varied forms. America's stock of social capital — the web of voluntary connections, both informal and formal, and attendant norms of trust and reciprocity that together are the wellsprings of much collective action — has been depleted over the past forty years and must be replenished. The task will require a broad-based national effort in which citizens themselves have a vital role to play, reconnecting with one another as much as with government. The importance of reforming the institutions of American democracy, a recurring theme among critics, receives less emphasis in Putnam's account. While professing sensitivity to this perspective and allowing that both individual initiative and institutional change are needed to restore the fabric of American democratic life, he nonetheless closes his book with the admonition that "institutional reform will not work — indeed, it will not happen — unless you and I, along with our fellow citizens, resolve to become reconnected with our friends and neighbours."¹⁰ The order of things seems clear enough.

Others who focus attention on societal evolution in their accounts of the challenges of contemporary democracy cast that evolution in a more positive

light. Rising education levels coupled with access to rich and diverse information sources have, the thinking runs, produced critical citizens with high expectations of government and the skills and resources to think for themselves.¹¹ The issues that matter to citizens have changed too. Many — younger generations in particular, whose value priorities have been affected by the conditions of relative affluence in which they have come of age — are drawn to causes that do not slot easily into the traditional Left-Right classifications that have structured political competition in many places throughout the twentieth century. Postmaterialist issues, such as the environment and identity politics, are the new concerns of the day.¹² These varied changes have created a governing context in which citizens are less likely to subscribe to conventional practice, less inclined to participate in the prescribed manner. This perspective on societal evolution is persuasive and resonates with the Canadian experience, where events in the constitutional arena saw the gradual assertion of citizen power over the course of the 1980s and early 1990s, culminating in the public rejection of the elite-brokered Charlottetown Accord. It is, furthermore, complementary to our institutional focus. It is not that Canada's political institutions are intrinsically flawed and have never been adept at capturing public sentiment and translating it into effective public policy. But society has evolved to the point that there is now a significant mismatch between the political institutions and the citizenry they are meant to serve. Rejigging the citizen side of the equation — transporting us back to a time when people were less able or inclined to participate on their own terms and were consequently largely satisfied with the traditional mechanisms of representative democracy — is, on this interpretation, neither desirable nor feasible. The only sensible solution is to look at the institutions and see how they might be updated to create a citizen-centred democracy that will allow for the enhanced representation of diverse viewpoints and greater opportunity for more frequent and meaningful political participation.

These debates in the wider field are not our primary focus, but they provide some broader context for the book. That democratic disengagement is a widespread phenomenon affecting many countries and potentially resulting from multiple causes is worth bearing in mind in reflecting on the institutional arrangements of Canadian democracy. This broader context hovers in the background, and occasionally comes to the foreground, of many of the chapters in this book.

This Volume

The reflections and analyses that made up the Strengthening Canadian Democracy project took various forms: refereed papers published in IRPP's *Choices* series, working papers in its *Policy Matters* series, and events big and

small that allowed for the exchange of ideas among academics, policy-makers and interested members of the general public. The current volume brings together a significant portion of this work (though interested readers will, as noted in the Preface, find more at the Institute's Web site). The items chosen for inclusion include the *Choices* papers, each of which takes up a single important theme, and a selection of shorter papers from an IRPP-sponsored conference on electoral reform, which first appeared in the Institute's monthly magazine, *Policy Options*. Where necessary, they have been updated to reflect developments since their initial publication. While these updates were undertaken prior to the 2004 federal election, which clearly altered the political landscape in significant ways, the new configuration of political power in Ottawa has not affected the deeper patterns and trends of Canadian democracy that are the principal focus of the papers.

The research series began with Richard Johnston's retrospective analysis of the abiding conundrum of Canadian party politics and so does the book. Canadian political parties have constantly struggled to straddle the regional divisions that represent this country's deepest faultlines. The Liberals have traditionally played the game well and been rewarded with office more often than any other party. The Conservatives have experienced more sporadic success, cobbling together coalitions that have suffered from internal tensions, the latest of which dissolved when the Mulroney coalition that had brought the West and Quebec into the Tory fold, splintered into Reform, the Bloc and a much diminished PC remnant. The lesson from history is that Canada's electoral system, despite its obvious incentives for opposition parties to rally under a single banner, has never really managed to forge two parties with enduring pan-national appeal. Real electoral competition has been lacking. While the parties of the Right have now come together in the new Conservative Party of Canada, the question remains whether the underlying centrifugal forces remain in effect and will produce a return to the patterns of the past. Inasmuch as the frailties of the Canadian party system are rooted in abiding structural divisions, the question arises whether a different electoral system might be better suited to the Canadian electoral environment.

Louis Massicotte's paper leads off the second section of the book, "Part B: Electoral Reform," and picks up where Johnston's ends: what would be the effect of introducing proportional representation at the federal level in Canada? While the issue is under consideration in several provinces at the current time, there is not the same consideration being given the matter in Ottawa. The discussions that are unfolding in British Columbia, Quebec, New Brunswick and PEI will help inform any debate that might transpire at the federal level, but there are distinct dimensions to be considered in the pan-Canadian context, in

particular the issue Johnston highlights, the regional and cultural diversity of Canada. Massicotte takes this into account, along with other factors relevant to an assessment of PR, including perennial anxieties over the durability of governments and the quality of governance under a proportional system. In the end he is persuaded that a change to PR would fulfill many of the hopes of its advocates without any serious deleterious side effects.

The electoral system deserved, in our view, special attention and consequently an IRPP conference was organized in May 2001 that generated other valuable insights and analyses on the subject. Attendees from all parts of the country joined invited guests from New Zealand, a former prime minister, the Rt. Hon. James Bolger, and Paul Harris, former chief executive of the New Zealand Electoral Commission. A full range of perspectives was on offer, including firsthand accounts of the change to a PR system in New Zealand that took place in 1996. We reproduce here a selection of those shorter papers, which originally appeared in IRPP's magazine *Policy Options*.

The first offers a counterpoint to Massicotte's advocacy of proportional representation. Tom Flanagan suggests that if Canadians are intent on electoral reform — and he himself is of the view that the electoral system is probably not of primary importance — we should look seriously at another system used elsewhere, the alternative vote. Leaving our current electoral system intact but for the substitution of ballots that would allow voters to rank candidates in order of preference would, in Flanagan's view, represent the preferred reform alternative. Flanagan's reasoning echoes Johnston's when he argues that the most pressing concern is to give voters real electoral choice by facilitating the creation of a viable alternative to the governing Liberals. While the merger of the Tories and Alliance would appear to promise just that without electoral reform, Flanagan cautions that the divisive tendencies that pulled parties apart in the past may yet surface again. He remains convinced that the alternative vote is a change worth considering.

The next contribution comes from Jean-Pierre Derriennic. It provides a thoughtful reflection on the values that should underpin the choice of electoral system. In Derriennic's view, a just system should encourage governments to treat all citizens as equals, allow for the expression of a diversity of political viewpoints, and empower citizens to remove governments they find objectionable. Drawing on these basic principles, Derriennic contends that both SMP and PR suffer from significant shortcomings that could be rectified through the use of the alternative vote. He also underlines that the alternative vote mechanism of ranking candidates in order of preference is compatible not only with our current single-member-constituency system but also with proportional systems, as is the case for the Irish single transferable vote. Whatever precise model is selected, it is clear, in Derriennic's view, that improvements could be made upon the current system.

Paul Harris offers insights from the New Zealand experience with electoral reform — the forces that produced reform in the first place and its subsequent reception by New Zealanders. The switch from SMP to PR was a long process that began in the mid-1980s and was finally in effect for the 1996 election. Harris — who served as research director for the Royal Commission that started the ball rolling with its 1986 endorsement of German-style PR — reports that the experience with the new system has been mixed, corroborating the sentiment expressed by other contributors that no electoral system is perfect. The piece here updates that experience, however, to include the 2002 election and reports that New Zealanders appear, after a lengthy transition period, to be settling into their new system. If there is still some lingering debate about the wisdom of the reform, it does not appear likely to be undone at this stage.

Three further papers speak to potential mechanisms of change. How might electoral reform come about? How *should* it come about? David Beatty is an enthusiastic advocate of judicial intervention to impose a change in electoral system. He describes the constitutional challenge that is being mounted by the Constitutional Test Case Centre at the University of Toronto Law School on behalf of the Green Party of Canada in the Ontario Superior Court of Justice. Surveying past court decisions in the area of electoral law, Beatty believes the case can be made that our current electoral system violates section 3 of the Charter, the right to vote, as well as section 15, equality rights. At this stage, it will take considerable time for the case to make its way through the court system; Beatty urges the federal government to use its power of referral to put the case directly before the Supreme Court of Canada.

Another route to electoral reform is outlined by Matthew Mendelsohn and Andrew Parkin. They first consider the circumstances that are likely to precipitate reform, drawing lessons from the experiences of other countries that have changed their electoral systems in recent years. The obstacles, they adduce, are considerable but not insurmountable. They next offer prescriptions for the decision-making mechanisms that should guide a reform process. Given that Mendelsohn and Parkin appear later in the book making a cogent case in favour of direct democracy, it is not surprising they argue in this shorter piece for a process that involves citizens deeply at all stages. The authors must be given full marks for prescience, as their advocacy of a citizens' forum to deliberate on the alternatives and formulate a proposal for ratification in a public referendum has taken concrete form in the Citizens' Assembly process in British Columbia. The current updated piece reflects on that exercise in light of their analysis.

We end the electoral reform section with a cautionary piece. John Courtney counsels prudence on two counts. First, he questions the wisdom of changing electoral systems, arguing that our method of electing representatives to

Parliament is but one element in a complex and interconnected institutional structure. Changes to the electoral system may have unanticipated — and negative — effects on other important components, such as our political parties. His second observation is that electoral reform requires a particular confluence of circumstances and conditions that seems to be lacking in Canada. In light of developments since the piece was first written, we invited Courtney to revisit the latter part of his analysis to determine its continued applicability. Had the conditions for electoral reform he identified fallen into place or were some of them less critical than initially supposed? Or were we, the editors, jumping the gun in suggesting the analysis might need revisiting? No province, after all, has actually changed its electoral system just yet. Courtney offers his assessment of the implications of current developments for the proposition that change is not readily effected.

The final section of the book, “Part C: The Broader Debate,” turns to other elements of the institutional architecture of Canadian democracy. The first contribution is Jerome Black’s examination of an important administrative change that took place in 1997. In that year, the method used to compile voters lists for federal elections was changed from door-to-door enumeration to a permanent voters list, officially entitled the National Register of Electors. Black raises important questions about the forces and motivations that led to the change, as well as its effects on voter turnout, both in the aggregate and among those groups most likely to fall through the cracks of the new registration regime. Finding flaws, he outlines measures Elections Canada is taking and others it might consider to help shore up the new system. It is a trenchant critique that highlights the need to look closely at what might appear, at first blush, to be an administrative modification of no great consequence.

In the next paper, Richard Nadeau and Thierry Giasson examine an important intermediary institution, the news media, the lens through which most aspects of political life are filtered for public viewing. Increasingly, some would contend, those who report from the political theatre are engaging in a sniping and superficial journalism that highlights personality and conflict at the expense of serious and thoughtful coverage of politics. The worst culprit is television, where a shallow treatment of the day’s events is the norm. The result has been a steady erosion of confidence in our political institutions and leaders. In investigating these claims, Nadeau and Giasson provide an extensive review of past research in the area and conclude that criticisms of the media may be overdone; further evidence would be needed to establish incontrovertibly the link between media coverage and democratic malaise. At the same time, there is sufficient concern about current media practices to warrant consideration of certain reforms that would encourage more edifying political journalism.

Much of the analysis in the book focuses on the federal level of Canadian politics. Donald Blake turns our attention to the provincial level, providing a detailed investigation of the rules and procedures that govern electoral democracy in different jurisdictions across the country. Fully updated to take account of the many changes since its initial publication, the paper highlights the strengths and weaknesses of different provinces across a variety of areas: redistricting procedures, regulations on political financing, the rules governing candidacy and voting and election outcomes. It also provides comparisons with the federal level on these same dimensions. The general conclusions are that significant progress has been made in a number of important areas and the provinces fare well when compared to the federal level.

Finally, Matthew Mendelsohn and Andrew Parkin consider the merits of direct democracy, in particular the use of referendums as a policy-making instrument. Their careful and considered analysis is aimed at countering the facile dismissal of this particular tool of democracy by those who see it as a conservative ploy designed to accomplish policy goals that cannot be achieved through the mechanisms of representative democracy. Drawing on a rich comparative analysis, the authors conclude that referendums are not of any intrinsic ideological hue and can have varied effects on policy depending on the context in which they are deployed and the rules governing their use. Through a systematic elaboration of important variants on referendum mechanisms, they outline the models they believe are most consistent with some of the better traditions of Canadian democracy. Mendelsohn and Parkin's paper is an important contribution toward the development of nuanced understandings and positions on a device which is probably the most simple and direct method of empowering citizens and which must be given due consideration.

The topics addressed in the book, and in the Strengthening Canadian Democracy project as a whole, naturally represent only a sampling of those that might have been included. Since the project's inception, a number of issues have gained greater public prominence and are likely to find their way onto the democratic reform agenda; indeed some have already been broached in components of the SCD project that could not be contained within this volume. Recent revelations about the generous gifts bestowed on federal cabinet ministers by corporate interests have raised new concerns about definitions of unethical behaviour and ways of policing it. Extremely low voter turnout among young Canadians in the federal election of 2000¹³ raises questions about this particular subgroup: what are the principal sources of youth disengagement and what can be done to tackle the problem? In the wake of the federal election of 2004, it might be asked whether more invigorating and enlightening election campaigns are part of the solution. The leaders debates, for example, have failed

to produce compelling discussion on policy issues in recent years, have failed by all accounts to inform and inspire voters. Can we not do better? Recent developments outside Canada — the recall campaign in California; the ongoing process of democratic renewal in Great Britain — also invite consideration and analysis by Canadians interested in thinking through the full gamut of possibilities for restructuring our democratic system.

Looking Ahead

All signs point to continued vitality on this front. The project of democratic renewal will remain a staple of Canadian political debate for the foreseeable future. It is heartening to see this issue animating citizens, engaging us in dialogue with one another and with our political representatives. In an earlier period, when the attention of Canadians was focussed on constitutional reform, one of Canada's leading political commentators, Peter Russell, saw fit to ask whether we were ready to become a sovereign people. Could we come together to embrace foundational principles that would henceforth govern our common life together?¹⁴ Our constitutional endeavours were not entirely fruitless, but failed to produce that elusive final consensus, leaving us in a state of deep division and weariness. The debate on democratic reform has the potential to revivify our political community, producing not only a more vibrant and dynamic democracy, but also a deeper comity among the individuals and communities that make up this diverse country. If a sovereign people is one that has decided how best to govern itself after a full and honest reflection on the alternatives, we may be taking an important step toward that goal as we fashion a new democratic future together.

Notes

1. Recent issues of Election Canada's magazine *Electoral Insight* have explored voting patterns among these two groups (see Vol. 5, nos. 2 and 3 (July and November 2003)).
2. A 2003 study conducted by the CGI consulting group concluded that on-line voter registration is "technologically feasible" but should be implemented incrementally. See Elections Canada, "On-Line Voter Registration Feasibility Study — Executive Summary," Electoral Law and Policy, at www.elections.ca
3. 2003 *Electoral Reform Commission Report*, pp. 82-97, at Elections Prince Edward Island Web site, www.gov.pe.ca/election
4. 2003 *Electoral Reform Commission Report*, p. 103.
5. Web site of the New Brunswick Commission on Legislative Democracy, www.gnb.ca/0100/index-e.asp
6. Indeed, the first significant application of this principle came in late summer 2004, when two proposed Supreme Court appointments were reviewed by parliamentary committee.
7. Dennis Pilon, "The History of Voting System Reform in Canada," in Henry Milner (ed.), *Making Every Vote Count* (Peterborough, ON: Broadview Press, 1999), pp. 111-21.
8. John Courtney, *Commissioned Ridings* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2001).
9. Task Force on Canadian Unity, *A Future Together: Observations and Recommendations* (1979), pp. 104-06.
10. Robert Putnam, *Bowling Alone* (New York: Touchstone, 2001), p. 414.
11. Russell Dalton, *Citizen Politics*, 3rd ed. (New York: Chatham House Publishers, 2002).
12. The postmaterialist perspective, first developed by American political scientist Ronald Inglehart, is applied to the Canadian case in Neil Nevitte, *Decline of Deference* (Peterborough, ON: Broadview Press, 1996).
13. One recent analysis of the 2000 election, which corrects for the tendency of surveys to produce inflated estimates of voting, estimates a turnout rate of 22.4 percent for those aged 18 to 20 and 27.5 percent for those aged 21 to 24. See Jon H. Pammett and Lawrence LeDuc, "Explaining the Turnout Decline in Canadian Federal Elections: A New Survey of Non-Voters" (Elections Canada: 2003), p. 20.
14. Peter H. Russell, *Constitutional Odyssey: Can Canadians Become a Sovereign People?*, 2nd ed. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1993).