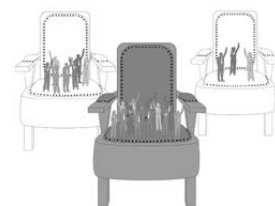


# WE NEED A NEW DEMOCRACY IN THIS COUNTRY



Lorne Nystrom

*Canadian democracy is on the verge of a crisis. At the federal level, voter participation has fallen sharply, to dangerously low levels. Parliament needs to be reformed, with more free votes, less power for the PMO and the legitimization or abolition of the Senate. But the electoral system also needs to be changed, so that people can vote their true preferences and know that Parliament will reflect those preferences. The best option would be a mixed member/proportional system, with a 50-50 split between constituency and party list members.*

*La démocratie canadienne est menacée de crise depuis que la participation aux élections fédérales a chuté à un niveau inquiétant. Le Parlement doit donc faire l'objet d'une réforme prévoyant des votes libres plus nombreux, une réduction des pouvoirs du premier ministre et la légitimation—ou l'abolition—du Sénat. Mais il nous faut aussi changer le système électoral pour permettre aux Canadiens de voter selon leurs préférences en sachant que le Parlement reflètera leur choix. La meilleure solution résiderait dans un système à la proportionnelle mixte où les députés sont élus à parts égales sur la base des circonscriptions et des listes de partis.*

I would like to thank the IRPP for the opportunity to say a few words this afternoon. Let me start off by saying I believe our parliamentary electoral system is in a crisis: We are sleepwalking toward a crisis in democracy.

Since I was elected in 1968, I have seen the gradual decline of the power of Parliament and the increase in the power of the executive through the Trudeau and Mulroney years. This trend has accelerated in the last five or six years with the Chrétien government.

The other trend, of course, has been the increase in the power of the judiciary, which happened as a consequence of the decision—the proper decision, in my opinion—to enshrine the *Charter of Rights and Freedoms* in the constitution, which can be used to give more power to the judicial system. But we have not seen any enhanced power to Parliament itself or to parliamentarians. I do believe that we need serious reforms of Parliament and the electoral system.

I want to summarize very quickly by saying that we need more power for individual MPs, and parliamentary committees. We have the most handcuffed parliamentary system in the world in terms of freedom of voting by

members of Parliament. In the mother of parliaments itself, in Great Britain, the Blair government experienced many many cases where backbench MPs voted against a government bill and the bill was defeated. I'm not talking about a budget bill, or something fundamentally very important.

The other change that is needed is, of course, less power for the executive and the Prime Minister's Office. Our Prime Minister appoints the Cabinet, the judiciary, the Senate, the head of military, the head of the CBC. He appoints the head of almost everything in this country and does so without the input of Parliament.

The other institution that needs revision is the Senate. The polls show that about five per cent of Canadians support the existing Senate. Five per cent—the Senators, their families, their cousins, their friends and so on! And the other 95 per cent want to either reform it, elect it or abolish it. I am on the abolition side. One way or other we have to do something about the Senate, whose annual cost to taxpayers is around \$60,000,000.

These are some of the Parliamentary reforms that I believe are necessary.

Now to the electoral side—the voting side. I think we have to make a serious move towards a new democracy in this country.

The Parliament of Canada does not mirror how people vote. In the last Parliament, 41 per cent of the people voted Liberal, and that party captured about 60 per cent of the seats in the House of Commons. If you go back to 1997, the Conservatives and the Reform/Alliance both had 19 per cent of the votes, but you had 20 Tories and some 60 members of the Reform Party sitting in the House. The NDP and the Bloc had 11 per cent each. Yet we had 21 seats and the Bloc had 44. If you go back to 1993, the Conservative candidates had a lot more votes than the BQ. But the Bloc had 54 seats and the Conservatives had two. The bottom line is a Parliament that does not reflect how people voted.

Right now we have three provincial governments that are in power even though they are the minority party compared to the opposition. In Quebec, Lucien Bouchard and the Parti Québécois got fewer votes than Jean Charest and the Liberal Party, and yet they govern the province. And to show that I am non-partisan, in my own province of Saskatchewan my own party—the Romanow NDP—got 38 per cent of the votes and the Saskatchewan Party got 39. And yet we have an NDP-Liberal coalition government in Saskatchewan. Also, in BC, the NDP government there got fewer votes than the opposition Liberals. You can go all around the piece and you find the same thing time and time again. Parliament does not reflect how people vote.

I think that is one of the reasons people are losing confidence in the Canadian political system. I remember in 1965, 1968, 1972, 1974 and so on you'd have 75 to 80 per cent of the people in this country voting. I was astonished to learn that in 1997 the voter turnout fell to 67 per cent and I thought that was rock-bottom. Until last fall ... 61 per cent! Plus the fact that about 1,000,000 people were left off the voters' list because we didn't have adequate enumeration of voters from coast to coast. So, people have given up, in terms of the electoral system and in terms of the voting system.

And there is another thing: we have fake majorities in this country. Since 1921 or 1923, we've only had three true majority governments that were elected by a true majority of the people. Yet, we've had a lot of so-called "majorities." The Chrétien government last time around had 38 per cent of the vote. That's the effective majority with the smallest proportion of votes in Canadian history. The only clear-cut majorities

since 1921 have been MacKenzie King and John Diefenbaker, though Brian Mulroney came very close, with about 49.99 per cent of the vote in 1984. So you have all these fake majorities.

I believe that for all these reasons people are giving up on the electoral system.

How do you change that? It's not going to be brought about by politicians, it seems. I introduced a motion in the last Parliament, motion 155, which would have set up an all-party committee to look at the various forms of PR that might be incorporated into our electoral system. This committee would travel across the country, set up hearings, listen to witnesses, come to a consensus and bring the consensus back to Parliament. If Parliament agrees to it, that consensus would then be put to the Canadian people in the form of a referendum.

We did some research, and the Library of Parliament told us that the last time there was a vote on PR in the House of Commons was in 1923. The last time a private member's bill was debated—which is non-voteable bill—was in 1979, and it was from Liberal Jean-Luc Pépin. I got lucky, my bill was drawn. It was deemed voteable. We debated it for two hours. We were supposed to debate it for a third hour, and then Jean Chrétien called the snap election last fall and we never got our vote. The motion was dropped. It would have been the first vote since 1923 but the election changed all of that.

The other reason why we have to look at changing and modernizing our voting system is that most of the democratic world has done it. We are one of only three countries in the world with more than eight million people that use a pure first-past-the-post system. The other ones are the US and India.

In Britain, the Blair Government has brought PR into the Welsh parliament and the Scottish parliament and there's some degree of PR in the Parliament of Northern Ireland. After the next election in Great Britain, we will probably see a referendum on PR for Westminster itself. So, we are a long way behind the United Kingdom.

And then we come to the old question of fairness. There isn't enough representation. We have lots of people that feel as though they have cast wasted votes for the defeated candidates. Votes in this country are not equal. If you're voting for the Liberal Party in Ontario, it doesn't take many people to elect a member of Parliament. However, if you're voting for one of the other parties, the Conservatives in particular,

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it takes a lot more people to elect a member of Parliament. So, the old question of representation and in that, of equality, is very important.

The other reason why I think we have a poor electoral system is that it aggravates regionalism in this country. We now have five regional parties in Canada. The Liberals have very few members in Western Canada. A system of proportional representation would erase a certain amount of the regionalism in this country, and Canada would be represented as a whole. It would draw the country together.

**A**nother important problem of fairness is that people don't always vote the way they want to. For example, I have a friend who has never in 25 years voted for his party of preference, which is the NDP. He's afraid. Mostly of the Tories and now the Alliance. So he votes Liberal all the time. He has always voted for the Liberals because he fears that if he doesn't vote for them, his vote would be wasted.

We should be looking at all of those things with PR in mind. With PR, all votes would be equal. There would be no wasted votes.

If we want to change the system, my own bias would be to look at the German system, which is a mixed member/proportional system. With the German model, we could keep our single member ridings, and then elect some of our

MPs on a so-called list system: 50 per cent from the riding, 50 per cent off the list. The list is based on an order of preference. A voter would indicate his or her first choice on the ballot, and the second and so on. The candidates from the list are used to top up parties that are under-represented by the riding system. And I think that in this country, we could go province by province. Saskatchewan, for instance, would keep seven of its 14 members in riding situations. The other seven would be chosen from the list.

We realize that each province is different. Quebec certainly has a very distinct culture, as does Newfoundland and the Prairies. To equally represent these various cultures, beliefs and values, we need to be able to add value to our House of Commons. I believe that PR is the way to go.

Some people say that you can't change the system because trying is too complicated. This just means that we are underestimating the intelligence of the people. People can learn quickly how to mark their new ballots, decipher the new system, and decide which democratically elected MPs they want to choose. Never underestimate the intelligence of the people. If we listen to the people, and give them options, they will make the right decisions.

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**Jenkins on two ballots** [T]he French system of two ballots or *deuxième tour* ... cannot be wholly convincingly dismissed by Labour and Conservatives opposed to any change in the electoral system for it is near to the method they have both recently used for the choice of their party leader, and therefore in many cases of an actual or future Prime Minister. These elections were in consequence peculiarly important, carrying a choice of far more moment for the limited parliamentary electorate than does a choice of local MP for the run of constituency voters. Yet neither Conservatives nor Labour have in any contested election this century thought of entrusting this grave decision to the vagaries of a FPTP system. Of course in an election for a single position, whether it be leader of a party, President of a Republic, or Mayor of London, the more complicated but at least arguably fairer systems, such as the Single Transferable Vote or the Additional Member System, are by definition inapplicable. If only one is to be elected it is not possible to achieve a balance. A true majoritarian decision is

the best for which it is then possible to go.

Nevertheless, despite its place in British party history, the second ballot is not a solution which the Commission is disposed to recommend. It suffers from nearly all the deficiencies of AV. In addition, like SV, it does not guarantee that each MP has majority support or at least acquiescence. It would involve the British electorate going twice to the polls, with many of them showing a considerable reluctance to go even once. And it necessarily involves a poll being spread over a minimum of one week. Until 1918 British general elections were spread over a longer period than is the current French habit but because of staggered polling days in different constituencies and not because of a second ballot. Despite this precedent such a spread would be inimical to the quick, sharp change of government (when that is the verdict of the electorate) which has become the British practice since 1945.

*The Jenkins Report, 1998*

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