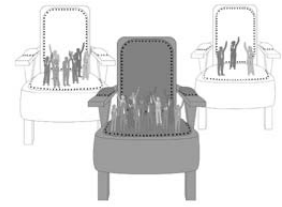


# PR CAN HELP SOLVE CANADA'S DEMOCRACY DEFICIT



Judy Rebick

*Declining voter turnout and rising street protests confirm that Canada's political system faces a democracy deficit. Increasing numbers of Canadians feel that elected politicians, whether in government or out, no longer reflect their views. There are several reasons for this, but a major cause is that our first-past-the-post system distorts voter preferences—as it did for instance in the 1988 federal election, when a majority of voters opposed free trade but the government that proposed it won. PR would lessen this distortion, would reduce the need for negative voting, and would lead to greater representation of minorities in Parliament.*

*L'érosion de la participation électorale et l'actuelle montée de la contestation confirment le déficit démocratique dont souffre le système politique canadien. De plus en plus de Canadiens jugent que leurs élus, au gouvernement ou ailleurs, ne représentent plus leur point de vue. L'une des principales raisons expliquant ce phénomène réside dans un système majoritaire à un tour qui fausse l'expression des suffrages. Ce fut notamment le cas lors du scrutin fédéral de 1988, qui a porté au pouvoir un parti favorable au libre-échange alors qu'une majorité d'électeurs s'y opposait. La représentation proportionnelle amoindrirait cette déformation de même que la tendance au vote négatif, tout en assurant aux minorités une meilleure représentation au Parlement.*

What was a slow-burning crisis in Canadian democracy is rapidly becoming a major conflagration and no one in power seems to have noticed. Parliament continues to fiddle while representative democracy burns.

Our undemocratic first-past-the-post electoral system is not the only problem with Canadian democracy, but it is fundamental. More and more people in this country feel unrepresented by the existing political system. This democracy deficit is reflected in voter turnout that declines every election: Our voter participation is now close to that in the United States. The democracy deficit is also reflected in the declining number of people who relate to political parties, and in polls that rate politicians and journalists near the bottom of the occupational respect chart. And, finally, it is reflected by the growing number of young people who are taking to the streets because they see no other way to influence government.

Our undemocratic electoral system didn't cause the intense and sometimes violent confrontations at the Summit of the Americas in Quebec City last April, but it did contribute to them. In 1988, this country experienced one

of the most important democratic moments in its history, the free trade debate. There was a full public debate with voice for all positions. Then the voters decided. In fact, the majority of people voted against the free trade agreement with the United States in 1988. But because of our undemocratic electoral system, the Tories, the only major party supporting free trade at the time, were elected. Then because of our winner-take-all parliamentary system, the votes of the majority against free trade just didn't count. The party with the majority of seats carried out its free trade agenda, barely recognizing the majority view against it.

In the following election, in 1993, a party opposed to the expansion of free trade through NAFTA (the North American Free Trade Area) won the election. I will not argue here that NAFTA was the key issue in that election. It wasn't. Brian Mulroney was. But once again, this time because our electoral system permits unaccountable majority government, those who opposed undemocratic free trade agreements were not represented.

Following their win in 1993, the Liberals reversed their position on free trade and became the *über* free traders of the universe with nothing to stop them except the electoral

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price they might pay in the next election. Given the weakness of the opposition, this price was effectively zero: There was nothing to stop them.

Of course, many other factors have caused the young people protesting in Quebec City to feel unrepresented by the existing political system. Corporate concentration of the media is just as harmful as our undemocratic electoral system. If the free trade agreement with the United States was a high point of democratic discussion, NAFTA was a low point. Outside of the business pages, there was virtually no discussion of NAFTA, despite the significant opposition to it.

What's even more important, however, is that our political leaders have abdicated their responsibility to govern. They claim to be powerless in the face of international finance capital, and they turn their power over to unelected bureaucrats in faceless international bodies who can permit transnational corporations to overturn democratic decisions in the name of profit.

This is not to mention that Parliament has turned into a circus of accusation and counter-accusation that is more like a soap opera, and not a very good one at that, than a body capable of serious political deliberation.

**B**ut despite the importance of these other influences, our electoral system is a fundamental part of the problem. The majority of Canadians in the last election and the one before it, threw out their votes. If you did not vote for the person who won, your vote doesn't count. Canada is one of only five democracies left in the world that use this archaic electoral system.

Consider, first, the majority of those Canadians who did vote voted against the Liberal Party in all three of their "majority" victories: 58.7 per cent in 1993, 61.5 per cent in 1997 and 59.2 per cent last year. Yet in this most recent election the Liberals won an even bigger majority of seats and now demonstrate an even greater arrogance in wielding their majority.

Consider also that first-past-the post exacerbates regional differences. The Alliance received one million votes in Ontario in the last election but won only two seats. In the light of recent events within the Alliance caucus, those million voters may be happy today that their vote didn't count but that doesn't change the principle. The Liberals got twice the votes of the Alliance in Ontario and 50 times the number of seats.

A similar result occurred in the West, where the Alliance's apparently impressive sweep does not accurately reflect its proportion of the vote.

Both Liberal and NDP voters out West are substantially under-represented.

In Quebec, the situation is just as bad. Because it is regionally concentrated the Bloc Québécois has many more seats than its votes should justify. And at the provincial level the Parti Québécois maintains its majority because sovereigntists who disagree with its current deficit-obsessed social and economic policies fear splitting the vote. The recent by-election in which Paul Cliche, a left-wing sovereigntist, won 25 per cent of the votes shows clearly that an important constituency in Quebec feels its views are not accurately represented by the Parti Québécois. It also shows how first-past-the-post ensures minority rule. Although Cliche and the PQ candidate together, both sovereigntists, got 52 per cent of the vote it was the federalist provincial Liberal who won.

A third important consideration is that first-past-the-post encourages negative voting. In a proportional representation system coalition government is the norm and people can vote for the party they believe in without worrying that their vote will help the party they hate the most come to power. Negative voting has probably hurt the NDP more than the other parties. The mostly arrogant chattering classes of the right smugly insist that the NDP gets no support because in fact the left has no support. But I suspect that most Canadians who have stopped voting are on the left of the political spectrum. Don't mistake this for a triumph of right-thinking. A failure of representation of political views is a failure of democracy.

A final consideration is how poorly our political system reflects the make-up of our population. It should be a scandal of major proportions that after 30 years of feminism only 20 per cent of the members of the House of Commons are women. Even France, where male chauvinism has been a badge of honour, has moved towards equal representation of women. But in Canada, we don't even talk about it any more. Evidence shows that women are better represented in countries with proportional representation. The same should prove true for minorities.

Proportional representation won't solve all these problems but it will give us a far more democratic framework in which to address them.

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