by John C. Courtney

ELECTORAL REFORM AND THE ROLE OF NATIONAL PARTIES

Le comportement électoral des partis politiques et des électeurs est le produit d'innombrables alliances, marchandages et promesses qui reflètent la nature spécifique du cadre institutionnel où ils se produisent. En se conformant à un système fondé sur le scrutin pluralitaire, les deux partis traditionnels du Canada ont démontré leur aptitude à faire place et à s'adapter au caractère social et régional du pays. Lorsqu'on envisage d'autres formules possibles, il importe de déterminer dans quelle mesure un changement qui amènerait les partis à abandonner une stratégie électorale pan-canadienne au profit d'un déploiement de ressources et de personnel plus limité et plus tactique servirait l'intérêt du pays.

As with baseball, football or hockey, the exploration of alternative electoral systems in Canada is a seasonal preoccupation. When, as in 1984 or 1988, elections produce majority governments with broadly based national support and/or opposition parties with a share of Commons' seats more or less commensurate with their popular vote, little attention is paid to the possibility of adopting a new electoral system. But the discussion rekindles when, as in 1979 and 1980 and since 1993, votes have been translated into seats in such a way as to produce regionally unbalanced parliaments and to discriminate markedly against some parties and in favour of others. Given the profound changes that the party system has undergone so far this decade, the topic of electoral reform, like professional sports generally, could now be in for a longer season.

At first blush, a reformed electoral system makes a good deal of sense. A more exact method of converting votes into seats would help to address many of the standard objections to the first-past-the-post system. Chief among these is its potential to distort electoral support by region and by party in such a way as to paint an inaccurate picture in the Commons of the competing parties' real level of voter approval. This peculiar feature of Canada's plurality system becomes particularly grating when Official Opposition status, committee chairmanships, committee allotments and research money are awarded to parties according to their parliamentary standings and without reference to their actual levels of electoral support.

The language of the critics of the electoral system from the time of Frank Underhill's early writings on the subject more than half a decade ago is by now familiar. To a number of academics, newspaper editorialists and public commentators (who, in some cases, had last launched a serious assault on the first-past-the-post system in reaction to the regional distortions in parliamentary representation after the 1979 and 1980 federal elections), the perversities of plurality voting were once again apparent in 1993 and 1997. Those who call for its reform see the first-past-the-post system as "discriminatory," "arbitrary," "unfair" and "ludicrous" in its application. It is described as a "deeply flawed" way of converting votes into seats — one that "effectively silences minority opinions" and "rewards parties of regional protest." At its most worrying level, plurality voting is said to produce a "warped view of the country" and to contribute to its "breakdown."

In the early stages of exploring alternatives to the single-member district-simple plurality vote system, discussion in Canada (among the small number who actually gave serious attention to the issue) centred largely on the merits of proportional representation, the single transferable vote and second ballot run-off elections. "Topping up" schemes (whereby additional seats would be distributed among the parties according to their respective share of the total constituency votes) were later added to the discussion list, as was Germany's mixed member system. With the recent adoption by Italy, New Zealand and Japan of some variant of the mixed system, Germany's post-war contribution to voting systems continues to generate considerable interest among advocates of electoral reform.

The differences among the remedies attest to the considerable variety of electoral systems available from which reformers could choose. That said, however,

there is broad agreement on four categories of electoral methods into which the very sizeable number of particular systems could be placed: majority, plurality, proportional and mixed. There are important and often unstated differences among these four with respect to their underlying assumptions about the purpose of elections, the wisdom of coalition *versus* single party governments, the creation of manufactured majorities, and other questions fundamental to an informed understanding of democratic theory and politics.

Accordingly, what is suited for one political system will not necessarily work in another. Behaviour (both collectively by parties and individually by voters) is, by definition, unique to each political system and each electoral contest. So too are the institutions and culture that help to shape policy and outcomes, whether at election time or not. Thus for a country as mindful of its regional, bilingual and multiracial character as Canada, it would be imprudent to change the method of casting and aggregating votes without first determining the possible consequences of such changes for the party system — the principal aggregative process of those social characteristics.

Among the host of considerations that would have to be fully explored in advance of Canada's accepting a different electoral system would be those relating to incentives and costs (social, not financial) that alternative electoral systems could reasonably be expected to offer or entail. Electoral behaviour of parties and voters alike is not shaped in a vacuum. Instead it is the product of countless linkages, bargains and anticipated payoffs that are constructed within the framework of a particular institution. Policy alternatives are laid out, decisions are made and votes are cast in specific contexts. To assume that elections decided under different rules would not elicit at least a measure of different behaviour on the part of parties and electors is to deny both the logic of individual and collective political behaviour and empirical evidence. Institutions, of which electoral systems are among the more visible, do affect outcomes.

Since Confederation, Canada's parties have been mindful of the way in which the game of electoral politics is played in a socially heterogeneous and regionally attuned political system using the first-past-the-post method. If they were serious about sending members to Parliament (and not all parties have met that test), they could follow one of two routes at election time. They could seek to win seats by attempting to appeal either (A) to regionally concentrated or (B) to nationally dispersed supporters. Generally only the latter strategy carried with it the prospect of forming a government, although there were (indeed there are, as the current Liberal government demonstrates) exceptions to that rule. Examples of parties following path A have included the Progressives, Social Credit and Bloc Québécois. The Liberals and, less consistently and certainly less successfully, the Conservatives have chosen path B. As they became a more-or-less permanent feature of the Canadian party system, the CCF and NDP fell between the two — striving to establish their credentials as a national party, but in fact depending heavily at election time upon relatively limited pockets of regional support.

At certain periods of their history, "national" parties owed their ability to form a government to their disproportionately high support in one or two regions, as with the Liberals under Pierre Trudeau in 1972-74 and 1980-84. At other times, only a party's survival in a region or two saved it from extinction and allowed it to regroup and eventually re-emerge as a "national" force. The Tories during the Liberal hegemony from 1935-57 survived that way. One of the telling differences between the two older parties since the first serious incursion by a third party in 1921 can be found in their different areas of relative electoral strength. For most of this century the Liberals effectively monopolized Central Canada and its two-thirds of the Commons' seats, leaving the Conservatives as the "national" party whose principal base of support was found in the less well-populated periphery. This difference has had a direct and significant bearing on the two older parties' capacities to form a government — that is, to convert a sufficient number of votes into a sufficient number of seats to come out on top at election time.

It would be imprudent to change our electoral system without first determining the possible consequences of such changes for the party system.

Irrespective of their differing capacities to win particular elections, the two older parties have between them struck the model of a political party that can best capitalize on the opportunities presented by the first-past-the-post electoral system if it is seriously intent on forming a government. The selection of leaders and candidates; the deployment of financial and organizational resources; and the championing of particular policies or programs are all done within the parameters of plurality voting in a plural society. These characterized the parties' preferred responses to the social and electoral environment within which they operated.

Take one aspect of leadership capabilities as an illustration of the myriad ways that parties shaped their institutional frameworks, policies and drive for office in response to Canada's plurality vote system. The day of the "Quebec lieutenant," whereby unilingual English-speaking party leaders were assisted in their quest for support in Quebec by a senior francophone colleague, is over. In its place, national parties over the course of the last three decades have striven to choose

leaders fluent in both official languages. The degree of fluency has varied from one leader to another, but the principle has not. It reflects not only the impact of television as the principal medium of politics, but also a conscious and deliberate recognition by national parties of the desire to attract support from both major language groups, from Quebec and the rest of Canada, at one and the same time.

This is a classic pan-national, coalition-building strategy which derives from the vote-maximizing incentives offered by the first-past-the-post system in a socially heterogeneous context. The extent to which the strategy of linguistic dualism has become an accepted part of contemporary party leadership in Canada can be seen in different ways. These have ranged from the virtual elimination of unilingual candidates from serious contention for a party's national leadership, to the reminder that Preston Manning's unilingualism served to bring to the 1997 election campaign that Reform's lack of a francophone and a Quebec presence threw into question any claims that might be made about its status as a "national" party. The Reform leader's well-publicized move within weeks of the 1997 election to take steps to correct in some measure for his deficiency in French, coupled with his subsequent support of the Quebec-directed national unity package agreed to by nine provincial premiers in Calgary in mid-September, may be early indications of a resolve on Manning's part to try to take his party from path A to path B. One could read into Manning's moves a calculated strategy to try to win support not so much in Quebec (because that may well be an impossibility, at least in the short to medium term, if at all, for Reform) as in Ontario (because of the need to reassure voters in that province of a willingness to accommodate in some fashion Quebec with the rest of Canada). If so, and this clearly is too early to confirm, Reform's leadership could be said to have moved toward acceptance of the conventional coalition-building imperative of the FPP system as it has long operated in Canada.

We must ensure that the institutional capacity of Canada's centrist, accommodative parties to respond to the country's social and regional character is not sacrificed in the reform process.

In a plural society such as Canada's the challenge facing political parties is to bridge regional, linguistic and racial differences, not to exploit them. As an active and on-going political institution a party is uniquely placed to meet that challenge and, in so doing, to try to turn the electoral system to its advantage as it strives to become a creditable national force. Clearly not all parties are, or have been, able to do that. Moreover, the transactional costs of attempting to build or to maintain a political party capable of attracting a plurality of voters and a majority of seats in as diverse and dispersed an electorate as Canada's is extremely high. The fate of the Tories in 1993 and 1997 speaks directly to that point.

Recent and distant elections alike are full of examples of parties that in one way or another have been "discriminated against" by the electoral system. That is a demonstrable fact. It is also true that critics have for the better part of this century seized those occasions to launch attacks on the electoral system and to advance alternative proposals.

But careful debate of those alternatives must ensure that the institutional capacity demonstrated by Canada's centrist, accommodative parties to respond to the country's social and regional character is not sacrificed in the process. One hundred and thirty years of Canadian history shows that, with exceptions from time to time and party to party, coalitions of interests have been built within Canadian parties rather than between them. This has meant that the country's political history has been shaped around, in Anthony Downs' terms, the great bulging center of the political and socio-economic scales. The fight has been for the middle, drawing the principal parties there with policies and leadership that were aimed, if the party was serious about gaining office, more at accommodating regional rivalries and linguistic differences than exacerbating them or trying to turn them to electoral advantage.

If because of different incentives offered by a new electoral system Canadian parties were to forego pan-Canadian, broadly based vote-maximizing strategies in favour of narrower regional or linguistic appeals, the locus of the principal coalition-building exercise would almost certainly change. In the extreme, negotiations over government formation, cabinet membership, policy outputs, patronage appointments and the like would shift from within a party to between or among parties. That is not necessarily an untoward development, as the political history of some countries with non-plurality votes attests. But in Canada that would be entering uncharted waters with no historical map of inter-party, as opposed to intra-party, elite bargaining to draw on. The critical question that this raises revolves around an assessment of how well the country's interest would be served by a change that could lead parties to eschew a pan-Canadian electoral strategy in favour of a more limited and tactical deployment of their resources.

John C. Courtney is Professor of Political Studies at the University of Saskatchewan. His most recent book is *Do Conventions Matter? Choosing National Party Leaders in Canada* (McGill-Queen's University Press, 1995).