

IF I HAD MY WAY... ...À MON AVIS

Question: If you had your way and were allowed to make one change to political institutions in Canada in order to strengthen Canadian democracy, which change would you make and why?

Question: S'il était en votre pouvoir d'apporter aux institutions politiques canadiennes un seul changement capable de renforcer la vie démocratique du pays, quel changement proposeriez-vous ?

FIX DOPE, THE BUSTED FLUSH AND OUR SCHOOLS

Mordecai Richler

In the short term, Canada, in common with many African countries, is sentenced to function as a one-party state. Obviously, neither the enfeebled Tories — not so much resurgent as showing the first flickerings of new life — nor the foundering and essentially goofy Reform Party are capable of dislodging the arrogant Liberals in the next election. This will be the case even should inadequate Jean Chrétien choose to run again, pleasing nobody so much as Quebec separatists, who justifiably regard him as their most winning condition.

Politicians out of office tend to moonlight, scribbling non-books (Trudeau, Chrétien), with a little help from their friends, while Joe Clark, to give him credit, did manage one in his own write. But I, on the other hand, am not a poacher. Between novels, I have never run for office. However, were I empowered to strengthen Canadian democracy, I would campaign for not one, but for several changes to our political institutions.

For openers, I would demand a long overdue reshuffle of our confederation cards. The Canadian busted flush. Obviously, thinly-populated

Newfoundland, Nova Scotia, P.E.I., and New Brunswick should be united as one maritime province. Based on past experience, these provinces, individually governed, have either squandered millions on an oil refinery in Come-by-Chance, constructed the biggest goddam cucumber greenhouse in the God-fearing western world, invested a fortune in a heavy water plant nobody needed, or bet the bank on a Bricklin car. So-called changes in government have meant little more than somebody else gets the snow removal and ad agency contracts. Folding the four provinces into one would make for huge economies, a less bloated civil service, and fewer politicians with their eye on the main chance for maritimers to tolerate.

Canadian life would also be enhanced if Manitoba, Saskatchewan and Alberta formed one prairie province. This would reduce the number of truly provincial premiers — each one crying me, me, me — from ten to five, clearly a cause for celebration. And, as a consequence, both the new maritime and prairie provinces, their populations multiplied and wealth increased, would enjoy more muscle in coping with bossy Ontario. Furthermore, paranoid Quebecers would draw some comfort from being one of five rather than one of ten, its vote, as things stand, theoretically equal to that of wee P.E.I., which is ridiculous even if one is not a separatist.

Loopy British Columbia is, of course, a special

case. In recent years three of its premiers (Vander Zalm, Harcourt, and now Clark) have had to resign in disgrace. The question yet to be resolved is: Are these people — out there on the benign side of the Rockies, strangers to six insufferable months of winter — ready for self-government, or should Ottawa put a commissioner in charge? I remain open-minded on this question.

I would demand that parliament put an end to hypocrisy and immediately pass a bill legalizing marijuana. Clearly this would impinge on the income of

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corrupt police forces and would impact negatively on money laundries. Yes, but somebody has to have the political guts to bring an end to the biggest farce since the Americans experimented with Prohibition. Marijuana is readily available in just about any bar I've been to in Montreal, Toronto, or Vancouver, never mind shopping malls or high school playgrounds. The favoured balm of sensible young people, it is, according to the most reliable medical authorities, far less injurious to health than the relaxants preferred by my generation, booze and tobacco.

Then there's the Quebec question, Canada's very own wasting disease-*cum-opera bouffe*. Duffer Chrétien vacillates between Plan A and Plan B, but won't commit to either; and Sheila Copps's solution is to offer free flags to the *hoi polloi*, which explains why so many separatists were able to use them as aprons during last summer's barbecues.

At the root of our problem within Quebec is our educational system. Catholics, Protestant and Jewish children were all educated in separate primary schools, brought up suspicious of one another. Were I empowered to create a real revolution in the province, I would oblige all Quebec children — be they Gentile, Jewish or Muslim — to attend the same primary schools, studying half the day in English, half the day in French, emerging bilingual, the riches of Canada's two seminal cultures available to them.

Vote for me.

Mordecai Richler's most recent book, Belling the Cat, has just been released in paperback.

INTERNET DEMOCRACY

Brian Flemming

Aspectre is haunting politically-mature nations — the spectre of direct democracy. Already in less-than-robust health, weakened political establishments in advanced democracies are cowering like cobras before mongooses as this spectre speeds toward them like some ancient asteroid, one capable of destroying every decaying democracy.

The flower of democracy is about 2500 years old. Yet it has never fully bloomed. As a widely-accepted system, democracy only became widespread in the 19th century. Then, unfortunately, the Bolshevik Revolution and Hitler's rise caused it to retreat into suspended animation as it fought a life-and-death struggle against the anti-democratic ideologies of communism and fascism.

In 1989, the "short" 20th century came to a close when communism collapsed. Suddenly, democracy was free to move once more towards its true destiny. But it will only reach it if it returns to its roots and enthusiastically embraces new information technologies.

Returning to its roots means revisiting one of the hoariest questions of democratic politics: Are politicians "representatives" or "delegates" of voters? Edmund Burke gave the conventional answer in a speech to the electors of Bristol in 1774: "Your representative owes you, not his industry only, but his judgement: and he betrays, instead of serving you, if he sacrifices it to your opinion."

Burke's paternalistic, elitist position might have been acceptable when voters were poorly-educated and lacking the (secret) information their political masters possessed. Today, most electors think they are as well-(or ill-) equipped to make important political choices as are a handful of randomly-chosen citizens, a.k.a. parliamentarians.

The Internet is the "apple of knowledge" which will drive political establishments from their comfy Gardens of Eden, where deference to authority was routinely demanded — and given. Politicians soon will be as effectively disintermediated as any other cyber-society middlepeople. The idea of handing total power for five years at a time to a less-than-respected political class is already perceived by voters to be as nonsensical as shopping for one's groceries only two days every decade.

The signs of crisis of confidence are everywhere. Political parties are in steep decline. Party loyalty is a quaint relic from the past. New parties, like Reform

and the Bloc, spring like dragon's teeth from fetid political fields — or disappear as Saskatchewan's Tories recently did. People know politicians put on their policy trousers one leg at a time, just as they do. Another wind-blown straw heralds the end of politics as a lifetime vocation. Most younger Canadians face multiple careers. Why shouldn't politicians? The era of the "expert" politician is over.

Direct democracy is based on the belief that every citizen is entitled to an equal voice in public policy and the management of government. As information technologies truncate time, most citizens instinctively know it's absurd to leave third-rate Burkes completely in charge of the political system for years. That growing belief will form the basis for the new electronic elitism.

As consumers, voters also know the Internet has enormously empowered them. In their millions, e-consumers can research, complain or bargain-hunt with the click of a computer key. Torrents of information slosh through cyberspace every nanosecond.

Soon, voters will demand the same power in the political marketplace that they already have in the commercial one. Citizens will no longer accept the Burkean demarcation between governors and the governed. That line has disappeared forever. Participatory democracy was one of the glittering goals of the sixties but was impossible because the technologies needed to achieve it didn't exist then. Now they do. The Charlottetown Accord referendum inadvertently whetted Canadians' appetite for direct democracy. Smug elites joined the "sure-fire" Yes forces but were stunned when the people rejected their betters' advice. Canadian democracy would never again be the same, as the Mulroney PCs discovered in 1993.

The greatest coming challenge for political institutions — in Canada and elsewhere — will be to transform the very nature of democracy itself. Indeed, creating a new means for citizens to be involved in decision-making may be the only way to stem voter cynicism and the meaningless changing of political guards.

Burke reincarnated might then say: "I owe you not just my diligence but decisions which are based both on my opinions and upon your properly- and scientifically-collected views. You are owed nothing less than a true, transparent and direct democracy. Cybergovernment of the people, by the people and for the people is here at last."

Brian Flemming is a Halifax columnist and business consultant.

LA PAROLE

André Pratte

Imaginons que le Canada adopte un système électoral comportant un élément de proportionnelle. Qu'on trouve un moyen d'atténuer la discipline de parti. Ou qu'on donne plus de responsabilités aux simples députés. La démocratie canadienne s'en trouverait-elle renforcée? À la marge, peut-être.

Mais le cœur du problème se trouve ailleurs. Une institution bien plus fondamentale que le parlement ou les partis est en lambeaux: la parole. Le parlement, après tout, n'est qu'un lieu; il n'existe que par et pour la parole. Les partis ne sont que des véhicules pour la conciliation et l'expression des idées. Et le pouvoir des citoyens dépend et se manifeste par cette même parole: parole entendue, parole donnée, parole exprimée, parole tenue.

Quelque point faible de notre démocratie qu'on étudie, à commencer par le profond cynisme populaire dont tout le monde parle, on constate que la corrosion origine d'une mutation du langage politique. Celle-ci se manifeste d'abord par la dilution du sens.

La corrosion de notre démocratie origine d'une mutation du langage politique.

Les politiciens d'aujourd'hui, bien formés par leurs conseillers, maîtrisent mieux que jamais l'art de ne rien dire. Ou d'affirmer une chose et son contraire. Qu'a voulu dire Jean Chrétien l'été dernier lorsqu'il a annoncé son « intention de mener (son parti) lors des prochaines élections »? Qu'il avait vraiment décidé de rester? Qu'il avait décidé de partir mais qu'en attendant, les candidats à sa succession devaient se tenir tranquilles? Qu'il avait « l'intention » de rester, mais qu'on ne sait jamais? Qu'il n'avait pas pris de décision? Comment une phrase si simple peut-elle être porteuse d'autant de significations contradictoires? Il n'y a là rien d'étonnant: elle a justement été conçue pour semer la confusion.

J'ai été frappé, septembre dernier, en entendant le nouveau gouverneur général Adrienne Clarkson répondre ainsi à un journaliste qui lui demandait depuis combien de temps John R. Saul et elle étaient mariés: « Nous sommes mariés depuis assez peu de temps pour trouver ça agréable, mais depuis assez longtemps pour être respectables. » La question était

on ne peut plus claire. Mais que signifiait la réponse ? De toute évidence, celle-ci avait été soigneusement préparée pour donner l'impression que Mme Clarkson répondait, tout en lui permettant de s'esquiver. Il y avait pourtant deux réponses simples à la question : « Ça fait X mois » ou « Je ne répondrai pas à cette



CP PICTURE ARCHIVE

Pourquoi pas la simple vérité ?

question parce qu'elle concerne ma vie privée. » Seulement, chacune de ces réponses exigeait du courage. Le courage de ses convictions.

Cette parole camouflage, typique des politiciens modernes, leur permet de discourir interminablement sans que les citoyens puissent jamais discerner ce qu'ils disent, encore moins ce qu'ils pensent. La dilution volontaire du sens a plusieurs effets néfastes. Le premier, le plus évident, c'est que les citoyens non seulement ne croient plus, mais écoutent de moins en moins ce que disent les politiciens. Dans de telles conditions, il ne peut y avoir ni véritable débat ni véritable choix. Pas de débat, pas de choix: que reste-t-il de la démocratie ? La forme: les boîtes de scrutin, les partis, le parlement.

Mais l'évacuation du sens a un impact encore plus profond. Les politiciens les plus efficaces ne défendent pas des convictions. La parole leur sert seulement à projeter des images floues et opposées, conçues pour séduire plutôt que pour convaincre. Un politicien peut ainsi dire le contraire de ce qu'il pense et néanmoins croire qu'il est fidèle à ses convictions. Un autre

dépourvu d'idées peut se persuader, et donner l'impression, qu'il est homme de principes. Il peut aussi en changer à volonté. C'est pourquoi en Occident, les élus ne gouvernent plus, mais gèrent. C'est-à-dire qu'ils laissent aller État et Nation au gré des vents dominants, qu'il s'agisse de lutte au déficit, de réductions d'impôts ou de mondialisation. Le choix électoral a perdu tout son sens.

La dénaturation de la parole publique est un phénomène subtil, profond. Le retour à un discours politique plus direct et plus sincère paraît si illusoire qu'on préfère parler de réforme parlementaire ou électorale. Cela fait des débats techniques fort intéressants. Mais ce ne sont pas les mécanismes de notre démocratie qui sont défectueux. C'est son âme.

André Pratte est journaliste à La Presse. Il a écrit Le Syndrome de Pinocchio — Essai sur le mensonge en politique (Boréal, 1997) et L'Énigme Charest (Boréal, 1998), traduit en anglais sous le titre Charest : His Life and Politics (Stoddart, 1998).

A DELIBERATIVE OPINION POLL FOR CANADA

Heather MacIvor

If I could make just one change to Canada's political institutions, I would be tempted to undertake a radical overhaul. A proportional electoral system, an elected senate, a reform of our education system to create more effective and informed citizens — any one of these would strengthen our democracy and elevate the quality of our national political life. Unfortunately, none is likely to happen. Proportional representation does not appeal to governments which owe their majorities to the current system. An elected senate would require a unanimous constitutional amendment. Education reform is impossible without the support of all provinces, local boards and teachers' unions. Is there any practical way to enliven our democracy which does not threaten those who benefit from the current system?

One such idea has been successfully tested in the United States and the United Kingdom. James Fishkin's proposal for a "deliberative opinion poll" (DOP) involves citizens in the policy-making process, while enhancing their information about and commitment to the political system. Fishkin summarizes the DOP process as follows: "Instead of just being

asked questions on the telephone, under Deliberative Polling randomly chosen respondents in a national sample will gather in a single place where, for several days, they can interact under conditions facilitating sustained deliberation. Such efforts produce very different results from conventional polls, for they create a microcosm of an engaged and informed public.”

Participants in a DOP, chosen to reflect the demographic characteristics of the electorate, are invited to a central location for a weekend of policy debate. Those who accept are asked to fill out a survey of their attitudes toward the issues under discussion, and receive a package of briefing material. When they arrive, they watch video summaries of the issues. Then they are divided into small discussion groups to prepare questions for a panel of experts. The experts answer those questions, and debate the issues in depth, on the following day. Finally, the participants complete a second attitudinal survey. In a binding DOP, the results of the second survey would guide public policy-makers.

Unlike most direct-democracy proposals, the DOP seeks to improve both the quantity and the quality of public participation. Referenda can be manipulated by wealthy interest groups with lavish advertising budgets. Citizens who do not understand complex public-policy issues may be motivated by prejudice, erroneous information, or the latest poll results. Recent advances in broadcast, computer and telephone technology have inspired calls for electronic “town halls” and Internet plebiscites. But such non-deliberative methods of decision-making threaten to substitute the prejudices of the strongly-motivated few for the opinions of the moderate many. The DOP model combines greater public input into policy-making with an inten-

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sive process of education and deliberation. The participants in the DOP experiments showed remarkable changes in opinion, from simplistic and unreflective responses to more nuanced and community-oriented attitudes. Most also reported a greater sense of political awareness, involvement and efficacy.

The DOP offers significant returns for a modest investment of money and effort. Canada could set up binding DOPs without making any other changes to our political institutions or processes. Indeed, a simi-

lar model of public consultation — a constituent assembly — has often been proposed as a way to break our constitutional impasse. If our politicians had the political will to establish binding DOPs, and the self-restraint to avoid tampering with the deliberative process in order to manipulate the outcome, my preferred change in the political system could be achieved within six months — a clear advantage over more far-reaching, but less feasible, alternatives.

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REAL TALKING, REAL LISTENING

Jennifer Stewart

My suggestion for institutional reform falls under the category of improving the public consultation processes undertaken by government. I wish that the bridge between the formal institutions of political life and citizens and their political ideas could be made stronger.

My suggestion comes from two meaningful experiences this summer. In the first, in Calgary, I attended a town hall meeting on homelessness in Canada with MP and Minister Responsible for Homelessness Claudette Bradshaw. The most obvious outcome was a palpable sense of frustration in the audience. The exercise in information-gathering was redundant: Too much time was spent talking about the problem, for which there is ample evidence on the streets and in the temporary shelters of Calgary and other Canadian cities, and not enough was spent on concrete solutions.

An even more striking part of the experience was the high number of participants who prefaced their comments and suggestions with these kinds of statements: “I am not politically involved,” or “I don’t define myself in political ways,” or “I don’t know anything about politics.” Yet, in every case, these individuals, particularly those who were homeless or who had been homeless, and those from agencies who work with the homeless, provided powerful and important information that was certainly relevant to policy-making. Their stories were heard by the audience who crammed the hall, and by city, provincial and federal government officials and politicians, most of whom stood at the back of the room. A line seemed to be drawn between those who were “political” and those who were not — except that, of course, every one of the people who participated was engaging in politics.

Later this summer, I had the good fortune to work for an afternoon in the library at the B.C. legislature. In the midst of the political turbulence of the day, the legislature was quite literally awesome. The architecture is inspired and the interiors are very beautiful. The walls and windows are engraved with words that speak of the search for the highest good in politics. These buildings stand as monuments to the hope democracy inspires.

The crucial question is: how to bridge the apparent distance between, on the one hand, the highest aspirations of politics as embodied in our institutions and, on the other, citizens and their understanding of themselves in the political process? The people who attended the town hall meeting on homelessness were not apathetic. They wanted their community to be a better place, yet apparently many did not define themselves or their aspirations in terms of politics or participation in the political process.

I think the best kind of institutional reform would ensure that public consultations have meaning and that the actors involved would take the time and opportunity to talk to people about their role in the political process. This is not education about how to be a "good" citizen but about what politics is at its best, about debate and participation, about hearing the interests of the other as well as having the chance to articulate one's own interests. Such consultations would be empowering and respectful, explaining the policy process, enabling people to express their ideas, making plans with them, and providing mechanisms for monitoring and evaluating outcomes. Attention would be paid to ensuring that consultations at the local level, where citizens articulate their concerns and suggestions, are taken seriously at the provincial and national levels.

The institutions in which politicians work are open in some places but closed in others. People walk through them as they do through a gallery or a museum, observing, hushed, not in their everyday lives. But these institutions are too powerful to be at the margins of people's lives. The political and government officials who work in them should not only invite citizens into these places and into the process — physically, intellectually and spiritually — but also help people to understand the political process and how their voices will be heard. Finally, as the town hall meeting on homelessness showed, efforts must be made to ensure that people are not defined out of politics because of lack of money or a feeling that they lack importance and power in public life.

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« EMPOWERMENT »

Mario Dumont

La démocratie fait partie intégrante du patrimoine des Canadiens. Pourtant les institutions politiques canadiennes sont, par bien des côtés, fatiguées, artificielles, désuètes et parfois carrément antidémocratiques. Le remède général est simple : retourner le pouvoir aux citoyens. Les méthodes sont diverses et complexes : rétablir une véritable fédération, faire élire le pouvoir exécutif par le peuple, restaurer une authentique séparation des pouvoirs, retrouver un Parlement efficace et vraiment représentatif, introduire l'initiative populaire, libérer les partis de leur dépendance envers des intérêts privés. Par où commencer ?

Je n'étonnerai personne en prenant mon inspiration de la pratique québécoise. Un des leaders qui a le plus profondément contribué à la démocratie québécoise, et donc à la démocratie canadienne, est René Lévesque. Il est venu à la politique active avec la détermination farouche de supprimer ce qu'on appelait à l'époque les « caisses occultes » des partis politiques et de redonner aux membres la propriété de leur parti. Aujourd'hui, certaines dispositions de la loi du financement des partis politiques, adoptée en 1977, gagneraient à être revues, mais dans son ensemble, cette loi demeure encore aujourd'hui une loi-modèle, non seulement au Canada mais dans le monde entier.

Peu de personnes savent que la loi québécoise du financement des partis est « *made in USA* » ... avec la collaboration soutenue de la « *California Fair Political Practices Commission* » plus précisément. Dans les années 1970, la Californie était réputée avoir la loi la plus progressiste au monde en matière de contrôle des finances politiques. Ce sont les membres de la commission qui ont guidé les législateurs québécois dans l'élaboration de la loi québécoise. Cette dernière exclut toutefois les contributions de personnes morales ce qui la distingue de la législation californienne. Grâce à cette règle, les partis politiques deviennent exclusivement tributaires des électeurs. Par le biais du financement populaire, les membres peuvent investir leur parti et influencer directement leurs orientations et leurs programmes.

Je me range totalement à l'avis de Tom Kent, premier éditeur d'*Options politiques*, quand il affirme que la dépendance financière des partis politiques canadiens envers les milieux corporatifs (et syndicaux pour ce qui est du NPD) constitue une tare fondamentale : « C'est le défaut le plus grave de notre système démo-

cratique, un rejet flagrant de l'égalité des citoyens. À moins d'être corrigé, ce mode de financement empêchera les partis politiques de remplir leur fonction démocratique, même dans un système de représentation proportionnelle. (« *How to Renew Canadian Democracy* » in Henry Milner (dir.), *Making Every Vote Count*, Broadview Press, 1999, page 57).

Le Canada n'a plus qu'un seul grand parti fédéral. Mais le Parti Libéral du Canada, qui est capable de prendre le pouvoir avec 38 p. 100 du vote, alors que 62 p. 100 des Canadiens ont refusé de le choisir, n'est plus qu'une simple machine de guerre électorale (et cela contrairement à ce qui se passe pour le Parti libéral du Québec). Il doit bien peu de choses à ses membres, n'est pas principalement financé par eux, ne se tourne pas vers eux pour l'élaboration de son programme et n'est pas irrigué par leur réflexion ou leur dynamisme. Une machine électorale carbure à l'argent. Le PLC prend le sien auprès des corporations et des grands intérêts financiers. Il n'est que logique qu'il gouverne avec eux et finalement d'abord pour eux.

L'importance de restaurer l'autorité des électeurs sur les partis est primordiale; cette réforme permet-

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trait d'ancrer tout le reste. Sans partis libres, tout le système est faussé : la représentation des citoyens à la Chambre des Communes, la prise de décisions par le gouvernement, la capacité du Parlement de contrôler effectivement le pouvoir exécutif, la possibilité même d'un véritable débat public sur l'avenir de la fédération canadienne et, en définitive, la confiance des Canadiens dans leurs institutions politiques. Nous vivons dans un régime d'usurpation du pouvoir par les partis politiques qui échappent au contrôle populaire. Or, il n'y a pas de jeu libre qui tienne si les joueurs au départ sont asservis.

On a souvent dit : « *British government is party government* ». Il urge qu'on puisse dire au Canada : « *Democracy in Canada is people government* ». Les Américains ont dégagé un très beau mot pour l'exprimer : « *empowerment* ».

La seule orientation vraie pour améliorer la démocratie canadienne se trouve du côté des citoyens. Il y

aurait de nombreuses réformes à opérer pour donner à la démocratie canadienne toute sa vigueur. Mais un point de départ s'impose : la ré-appropriation des partis par les électeurs. La démocratie, et son amélioration, ne surgiront pas de partis antidémocratiques. La Commission Lortie a complètement manqué le bateau à ce chapitre. Espérons que la prochaine tentative fédérale, quelle qu'elle soit, osera s'attaquer au problème de fond.

Mario Dumont est député à l'Assemblée nationale et chef de l'Action démocratique du Québec.

END FIRST-PAST-THE-POST

Miriam Lapp

If I could make one change to Canada's political institutions in order to strengthen Canadian democracy, I would adopt a new electoral system. In assessing the merits of an electoral system, I am guided by the following criteria (recently laid out by André Blais in the first issue of *Electoral Insight*): accountability, representativeness, fairness, and equality. In addition, electoral systems should strike a balance between effectiveness and accommodation, party cohesion and freedom for representatives, and simplicity and precision.

While no electoral system will perfectly satisfy each of these criteria, I believe that Canada's single-member plurality, or first-past-the-post (FPTP) system is particularly deficient.

Let me begin with the things FPTP is purported to do reasonably well. The first relates to accountability. Defenders of FPTP argue that it allows voters to assign responsibility for government decisions and makes it relatively easy for them to "throw the rascals out." I would tend to agree with the first part of this statement, but not the second. It was relatively clear to Ontarians who was responsible for implementing cuts to education and health care under the Conservative government of Mike Harris, and most voted to throw the rascals out in the 1999 provincial election. The problem, found in any system having more than two parties, is that the majority was divided on who should replace the rascals. The result is that Ontarians ended up, yet again, with a government most voters did not want.

A second argument in favor of FPTP is that it produces effective governments, while maintaining a reasonable level of accommodation. Those who



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**Without first-past-the-post
would this man be smiling so?**

invoke this argument tend to point to the stability of the majority governments produced under FPTP. Stability is not always a good thing, however. Canada's experience of one-party dominance for most of the past century is an example of how stability may be taken too far. As for accommodation, it appears to have worked reasonably well with respect to regional, linguistic and ethnic cleavages, at least until recently. But in terms of other forms of social division, recent experience in Ontario has shown how FPTP can produce governments that are highly effective in implementing their policies, and yet lack any sense of accommodation.

With its single-member constituencies, FPTP should produce relatively strong representatives. However, in a parliamentary system, in which party cohesion is vital to the survival of the government, freedom for individual representatives is in practice less important than party discipline. Some, pointing to the American experience of very strong representatives and very weak parties, would argue that this is a good thing.

Perhaps the strongest argument in favour of FPTP is its sheer simplicity. Nothing could be easier than marking a single X on a ballot. But simplicity must be balanced against precision. The vote should reflect as accurately as possible the voter's preferences, which normally consist not only of a first choice, but a second and third as well. A single X on a ballot cannot reflect multiple preferences. Voters

may try to vote strategically, but this is a very imperfect means of expressing preferences, as the recent Ontario election demonstrated. Rather than encourage strategic voting, we should look for ways to make sincere voting more effective.

Turning to the remaining criteria — fairness, equality and representativeness — FPTP fares even less well. It is systematically biased against small parties with widely diffused support, and it underrepresents women, aboriginals and visible minorities. It also fails to ensure that each vote is weighted equally: It took approximately 32,000 votes to elect a single Liberal in the 1997 federal election, compared to 68,000 for a New Democrat and over 120,000 for a Progressive Conservative. Finally, with its tendency to turn electoral minorities into parliamentary majorities and to shut out minor parties that are not regionally concentrated, it is difficult to argue that FPTP produces legislatures and governments that are broadly representative of the electorate.

FPTP's failure on these last three criteria is particularly troublesome. If democracy is preferable to dictatorship because it produces policies that are more likely to reflect the views of the majority and helps conflict be dealt with in a peaceful manner, then the failure of FPTP to satisfy the criteria of fairness, equality and representativeness is very serious. Without these, citizens' sense of political efficacy and willingness to accept the legitimacy of electoral outcomes are severely tested. Canada's declining rate of voter turnout and increasing levels of public cynicism are evidence of this.

My emphasis on fairness, equality and representativeness inclines me toward some form of proportional representation. I recognize, however, that the tradition of single-member constituencies is very strong in Canada. For this reason, I would advocate the adoption of a mixed-member proportional (MMP) system. But rather than argue in favor of any one system, my goal here is to provoke public debate around this issue. While academics have been thinking about it for some time, electoral reform has yet to be taken up in any serious way by the mainstream media. This is unfortunate because change will not be initiated by any political party that believes it has a shot at turning an electoral minority into a parliamentary majority. As long as this is the case, Canadians' faith in democracy will only continue to erode.

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WE NEED SOME FORM OF PROPORTIONAL REPRESENTATION

Nancy Riche

If I had my way and could make one change to political institutions in Canada in order to strengthen Canadian democracy, I would change our electoral system from the “first past-the-post” (FPTP) system to proportional representation. (Of course, this would happen only after I abolished the Senate and changed the campaign finance laws).

FPTP inevitably distorts the make-up of Parliament in relation to how the people's votes were cast. Proportional representation (PR) is not the answer to all our problems, but it would bring about important changes. The first would see the Parliament of Canada more accurately reflect the political preferences of the voters. The second change would flow from the first — making the executive of Parliament more responsive to the members of Parliament.

There are a variety of ways in which PR could be implemented. I believe that we must keep the ele-

ment of an MP attached to a geographic area intact. This could be done through multi-member large ridings or extra seats that were allocated to a provincial or regional list to compensate for under-representation through FPTP. If the latter method were chosen, rules could be set so that minority political philosophies were adequately represented, as well as sections of the population, such as women and aboriginals, which are currently under-represented in Parliament.

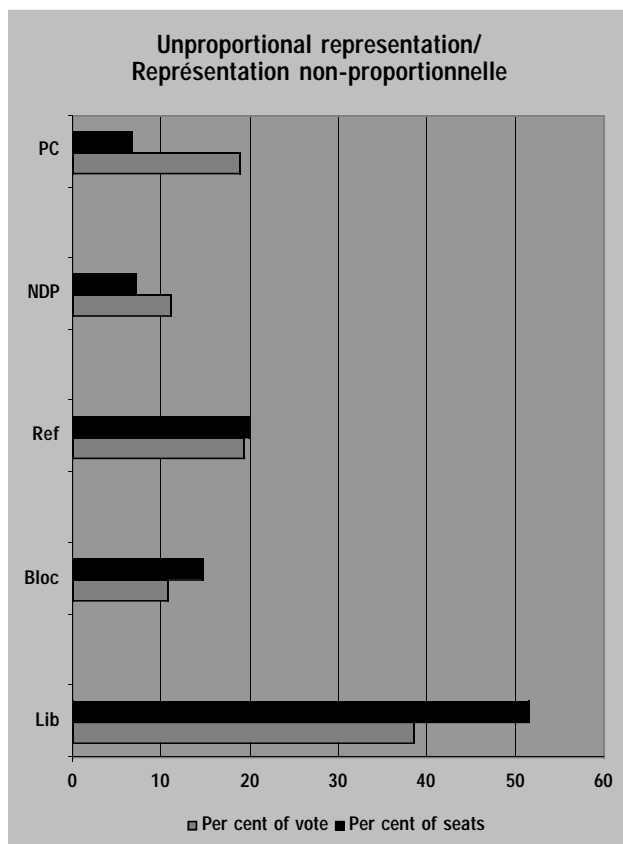
Two big concerns about PR are that it would move the choice of MPs to the backrooms of parties and that it might result in unstable governments or a government like Israel's, where very small parties had unjustified influence. Any system of PR I support would have the vast majority of MPs elected directly by their riding. Any use of the lists would have general rules attached to it, such as those I have suggested above requiring representation for currently under-represented sections of the population.

It is true that in practice PR would likely mean coalition governments, as the usual outcome would be that no party would win an absolute majority on its own. Rather than this being a weakness, however, I see it as a strength. The parties would realize that they would have to cooperate to get basic business done and to do so in a way that took into account at least some of the priorities of the other parties. This has been the PR experience of countries like Sweden and Germany. I would add that parties receiving a very small percentage of the national vote would not be entitled to a PR seat. The West Germans have used five per cent as their threshold, and a similar rule might be adopted here.

When FPTP is combined with party discipline in Canada, it has tended to mean near dictatorship by executive. Remember the FTA and GST? A majority of Canadians were opposed to both policies. Yet the election results saw the pro-GST, pro-FTA party receive the most seats on the strength of less than 50 per cent of the votes — and the rest is history. I don't think this is good for democracy or for Canada. A parliament in which the governing party had to pay attention to other parties as well as its own members would very likely improve our situation.

The big question is how to get a government to pass legislation that would mean that it probably could not win an absolute majority in the next election. The only realistic answer is that we need to elect a minority government to start with.

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DE MODESTES RÉFORMES

Lysiane Gagnon

Disons-le tout net, il y a peu de pays plus démocratiques que le Canada, si l'on entend par démocratie le degré de contrôle maximal du citoyen sur les institutions collectives.

Même le régime parlementaire, que plusieurs voudraient remplacer par un régime présidentiel (sur le modèle américain), se trouve ici tempéré par des institutions que l'on ne retrouve pas dans la mère-patrie du parlementarisme. D'une part, la Charte des droits limite singulièrement le pouvoir des politiciens, et partant, celui du premier ministre, en soumettant une partie de la législation à des tribunaux indépendants.

D'autre part, la nature fédérative du Canada limite le pouvoir de tous les chefs de gouvernement, qui doivent composer avec leurs homologues dans une foule de domaines. Le pouvoir, au Canada, est plus fluide que dans les pays à direction centralisée comme la France, et son exercice, plus périlleux, parce qu'il repose sur la coopération et la concertation entre divers acteurs.

Il faut dire que dans l'ensemble des démocraties libérales, le pouvoir politique est de toute façon beaucoup plus limité que ne le veut le stéréotype du politicien tout-puissant entre deux élections: limité par la relative impuissance des gouvernements à agir sur les forces du marché; limité par les groupes de pression et les médias, qui agissent plus fortement que les partis politiques sur l'opinion publique; limité enfin par la nécessité électorale de gouverner autour du centre. C'est d'ailleurs pourquoi la procédure de rappel par laquelle les Réformistes voudraient pouvoir congédier un politicien en cours de mandat constitue un faux remède à un problème inexistant. Ce projet donnerait aux groupes de pression un pouvoir exorbitant et tient davantage de la démagogie populiste que de la démocratie au vrai sens du terme.

Que faudrait-il changer au Canada pour le rendre plus démocratique ?

Chose certaine, j'évitais comme la peste toute réforme qui nécessiterait la réouverture de la constitution, cette boîte de Pandore. Les expériences de 1981 (rapatriement de la constitution), 1987-1990 (Meech) et de 1991-1992 (Charlottetown) ont clairement démontré que les consensus sont impossibles à obtenir et que la multiplicité d'intérêts particuliers rend pratiquement impossible toute entente le moins rationnelle.

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les régimes totalitaires, ou les États émergeant d'immenses tragédies, se sont donné des constitutions parfaites (et généralement inapplicables), pour l'excellente raison que les textes n'ont pas été débattus dans de larges forums.

Parce que je suis convaincue que le mieux est souvent l'ennemi du bien, et qu'à s'acharner sur des plaies bénignes on risque de provoquer l'infection, je me contenterais de réformes circonscrites et pragmatiques.

Ainsi, je redessinerai les cartes électorales en fonction du principe fondamental de l'égalité des votes. Il est anormal que l'écart entre la représentation électorale des comtés urbains et celle des comtés ruraux à faible densité de population puisse aller jusqu'à 25 p. 100. Cette disparité s'expliquait à une certaine époque, alors que les députés devaient sillonner régulièrement leur comté pour rencontrer les électeurs. Elle est inacceptable à l'heure d'Internet et autres moyens de communication ultra-rapides qui abolissent la distance géographique.

Par souci de logique, j'éliminerais aussi les protections archaïques empreintes de paternalisme dont

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jouissent certaines provinces de l'Est. D'où, d'ailleurs, mon opposition à l'Accord de Charlottetown, qui accordait au Québec la garantie d'une représentation minimale aux Communes sans égard aux réalités démographiques, de même qu'au projet d'un sénat Triple E qui octroyait un nombre égal de sièges à toutes les provinces sur le modèle du sénat américain.

Quant au sénat « élu et efficace », il m'apparaît superflu. Le Canada, avec ses trois paliers de gouvernement, sans parler des communautés urbaines, est déjà un pays sur-gouverné en regard de sa faible population. Il n'y a pas lieu de rajouter d'autres institutions, d'autant moins que les provinces de l'Ouest, d'où vient la réclamation du Sénat Triple E, devraient bientôt voir leur poids s'accroître aux Communes grâce à leur expansion démographique. Une carte électorale où chaque vote aurait le même poids éli-

minerait à moyen terme le sentiment de sous-représentation qu'éprouvent les électeurs de l'Ouest.

Faudrait-il réviser le mode de scrutin, de manière à prévenir les plus grossières disparités entre le vote populaire et la représentation électorale? Chose certaine, il faudrait y aller prudemment. La représentation proportionnelle a plusieurs effets pervers: en Israël, où elle existe à l'état pur, la tyrannie des petits partis a entraîné la paralysie politique. En France, la RP (abolie depuis) a favorisé l'émergence du Front national. L'Italie a également commencé à se débarasser de la RP.

En règle générale, je me méfie de la RP parce qu'elle renforce le pouvoir des appareils politiques sur les partis, brise le lien direct entre l'élu et l'électeur (ou alors, dans un système mixte, crée deux classes de députés), multiplie les tractations de coulisses entre les partis (lorsqu'il y a coalition ou nécessité de parvenir à un compromis quelconque), et enfin, parce qu'elle renforce les groupes de pression marginaux; ces derniers n'éprouvent pas le besoin d'influencer les grands partis s'ils sont assurés de quelques sièges. Quant à moi, je préfère voir les féministes ou les écologistes influencer de l'intérieur les partis de gouvernement plutôt que d'entendre une poignée de militants radicaux, sans racine dans l'électorat et sans antenne au sein du pouvoir ni même au sein de l'Opposition officielle, discourir dans le vide au parlement.

Faudrait-il plutôt examiner le système à deux tours à la française, qui garantit théoriquement que le député est élu par une majorité? Probablement, encore qu'il ne soit pas évident que cela corresponde à un besoin ressenti par la population.

Compte tenu du pouvoir grandissant dont jouit l'appareil judiciaire, nombreux sont ceux qui réclament que les candidats à la Cour suprême soient soumis à l'examen d'un comité parlementaire plutôt que nommés arbitrairement par le premier ministre. Théoriquement, c'est une idée qui se défend, encore qu'il faudrait être bien naïf pour croire que cet examen ne se ferait pas selon des lignes de parti, comme le démontre le cas américain. Le cirque médiatico-sénatorial auquel a donné lieu la nomination du juge Clarence Thomas n'est pas un exemple particulièrement inspirant. Le dernier exploit de la majorité sénatoriale républicaine est d'avoir bloqué la nomination d'un juge noir qui avait le tort d'avoir proposé l'abolition de la peine de mort.

On voit que mon programme de réforme est fort modeste. Je trouve en fait qu'il y a quelque chose d'hypocondriaque dans le regard anxieux que tant d'intellectuels canadiens portent sur l'état de santé de notre démocratie. Les vrais problèmes du Canada n'ont rien à voir avec une carence en matière d'institutions démocratiques. La façon dont le pouvoir est exercé et la qualité du personnel politique importent davantage que le cadre politique proprement dit.

Le grand problème politique du Canada est l'aliénation du Québec, et c'est là un problème autrement plus important que les réformes de structures. Ces interrogations incessantes sur les aspects les plus superficiels de nos institutions me font penser au type qui s'inquiète de ses boutons d'acné en oubliant (ou pour oublier?) le cancer qui le ronge.

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