Electoral Reform and Social Justice

By Adriane Carr

Our First-Past-The-Post (FPTP) voting system was designed over a century ago in England when there were only two parties—the "Tories" and the "Whigs". It doesn't work for a 21st century diverse, multi-party society. Key shortcomings include:

1. Negative, adversarial politics. FPTP elections are highly competitive "horse races". Parties campaign negatively against each other and fear-monger so people will vote for them by default. Larger parties accuse smaller parties of "splitting the vote" and pressure voters to "vote strategically" instead of voting for the person or party they like the best. It's bad for democracy if people vote out of fear and new parties aren't encouraged. It's also bad for governance, as voters swing negatively from one big party to the other, and each new government rips up the work of the last government.

2. It's unfair to voters and discourages voter participation. Under our system, if you don't vote for the winning candidate in your electoral district, your vote doesn't actually count. Often the majority of votes don't count towards electing someone. Unrepresented citizens opt out of voting. A 2003 study showed 30% of eligible BC voters not even registered to vote, including 80% of youth. Only 70% of registered voters actually voted in BC in 2001. The BC Liberals were actually elected in 2001 by only 33% of eligible voters. No wonder the majority of people are displeased— they either didn't vote or voted for a different party that didn't get fair representation.

3. It distorts power. Under FPTP, a party's share of seats isn't equal to its overall share of the vote. Winning parties usually get more seats than they deserve. In the last 50 years of majority governments in BC, only one party actually won a majority of the vote (in 2001). The rest had majority power but a minority of the actual vote. Some were even 'wrong winners". In 1996, for example, the Liberals won 41% of the popular vote to the NDP's 39%, yet the NDP won more seats and formed a majority government. In 2001 our voting system distorted power in a different way. The Liberals won a "landslide victory" of 97% of the seats with just 58% of the vote, leaving virtually no opposition despite the NDP winning 22% of the vote and the Green Party winning 12% of the votes. By distorting and discounting the will of the voter, our FPTP voting system undermines and devalues the democratic process.

We can change our voting system to make it fairer, just as we have extended the franchise over time—to women, First Nations, Asian-Canadians and younger voters. Proportional Representation (PR) systems, used by a majority of the world's democracies, are specifically designed to produce fair results by treating all votes equally and making almost all of the votes count in electing representatives. In pure PR voting systems, the percentage of seats in the legislature a party gets is equivalent to the overall percentage of

votes it receives in an election. People vote for a party and the seats are filled from party lists that are presented to voters before the election. In many countries, voters rank the candidates on the party's list as part of the process of voting. Most party lists are well-balanced for regional, gender and ethnic representation so that the party appeals to a wider range of voters. As a result, countries with PR voting systems have much higher proportions of elected women and significantly better regional and ethnic representation. Some people worry that PR voting systems deliver minority or coalition governments. This is true, but it makes for more cooperative politics and more stable legislation. In Canada, minority federal governments with an NDP balance of power gave us universal medicare and the Canada Pension Plan. In order to limit the proliferation and splintering of parties, most PR countries have an established "threshold" — a minimum percentage of the popular vote (commonly four or five percent) that a political party must get in order to win seats.

Mixed Member Proportional (MMP) systems, like Germany and New Zealand, combine the benefits of PR with maintaining locally elected representatives. Voters get two votes: one for a local ML A and the other for the party of their choice, with a party's share of the party vote determining its overall share of seats in the Legislature. This is the most popular voting system advocated by citizens giving input into BC's Citizens' Assembly on Electoral Reform (see below).

The real "democratic deficit" across Canada are the citizens who opt out of voting or whose votes don't count. This has lead many governments in Canada to pursue electoral reform. This year, the B.C. government struck a Citizens Assembly on Electoral Reform with the power to put a fairer voting system to a referendum vote in the next provincial election in May, 2005 (for more information see www.citizensassembly.bc.ca). In the city of Vancouver, an electoral reform commission is examining whether to switch from an "at-large" system to a different electoral system such as a ward system or "singletransferable-vote" that would offer more geographically balanced representation or more proportional electoral outcomes. A commission in Prince Edward Island has just recommended changing to a Mixed Member Proportional voting system there. Quebec, Ontario, New Brunswick and the Yukon Territories are all pursuing electoral reform. And the Law Commission of Canada, asked to look into electoral reform by our national government, has just come up with a recommendation for a Mixed Member Proportional voting system for Canada.

Such electoral reforms spell hope for democracy in Canada. There's no doubt that voters will be less cynical and governments more responsive when votes truly count and electoral outcomes are fair.

Suggested Websites:

- http://www.citizensassembly.be.ca
- http://www.freeyourvote.bc.ca
- http://www.fairvotecanada.org
- http:://www.aceproject.org
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