

Developing a coalition for electoral reform

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For all the failings of the first-past-the-post electoral system--and they are considerable--there is nonetheless a very powerful interest group that has a strong incentive to keep the system in place. That interest group is the 301 members of Parliament. They--we, because I am one of them--have the power to decide what the electoral system will be only because first-past-the-post put us here.

It may be that we will be able, through the efforts of high-minded MPs like Lorne Nystrom and of others like him, to temporarily build a majority within the House of Commons that is brave enough or self-sacrificing enough to abandon the status quo for a future that would return only some of us to future Parliaments, but it will be an uphill battle. And if we engage in uphill battles, we must make sure that as many factors as possible are on our side.

I want to make a specific proposal. Not a proposal for a specific electoral system to replace first-past-the-post. I do not want to endorse the mixed member/proportional system, or the alternative ballot, or multiple member districts, or any of the other versions of proportional representation that have been put forward in the past. Each of these has its own unique merits, and each has some demerits as well.

But--most significantly--each system has a reasonably predictable impact on how well each of the existing parties would perform in a future election if the vote distribution were to be the same as it was in last November's general election. If we try as a group to select a system in advance, I can guarantee that the system will be reviewed and analyzed by each person and by each party with one question foremost in mind: How will this help or hurt me? And if any part of the tenuous coalition that we might begin to build decides that partisan or personal considerations outweigh the merits of the specific system being proposed, that in itself will likely prove sufficient to kill the proposal.

So I propose that Canada's parliamentarians engage in a three-stage process to bring about the successful implementation of genuine electoral reform.

First, we need to build a coalition of parliamentarians, intellectuals and journalists behind the idea that first-past-the-post is not acceptable in a mature democracy, and that some kind of electoral reform is needed. This process is already partly underway. For example, electoral reform has a prominent place in the Canadian Alliance *Statement of Policies and Principles*, which says the following: "To improve the representative nature of our electoral system, we will consider electoral reforms, including proportional representation, the single transferable ballot, electronic voting, and fixed election dates, and will submit such options to voters in a nationwide referendum."

Second--and of course here I am merely repeating my own party's proposals on the matter--we need to establish a process by which Canadians can vote directly on the question of electoral reform. But I do not favour a single referendum. That would involve selecting a single model of electoral reform, and putting that variant on the ballot, with voters choosing between that particular model of electoral reform and the status quo.

Instead, I recommend a referendum to authorize the striking of a commission and also to authorize the holding of a second referendum on the findings of the commission. The commission could contain members of all political parties, or it might consist of experts and individuals of undoubted integrity and impartiality. Its mandate would be to select three or perhaps four alternative models, which would be presented to the Canadian electorate in the second referendum.

The third step in the process would therefore be the holding of the second referendum that has been mandated by the first. In this referendum, the electorate would be presented with a preferential ballot on which each voter would rank the proposed models in order of preference. If one model were to have the support of a majority of voters on the first count of the ballots, then that would be the country's new electoral system. But if no model were chosen, the least-preferred model would be removed from the table, and all ballots in which this model had been indicated as the first choice would be redistributed according to the second choice of the voters who had cast those ballots. This process would continue until one model had obtained at least half the total votes cast.

Such a process ensures that a consensus result would emerge. The system finally chosen might be the ideal preference of most voters. But if not, at least it would be a system which very few had found to be completely unsuitable. And just to be on the safe side, the existing first-past-the-post system would be included as one of the alternatives which voters could select on their preferential ballots. This would ensure that even if the commission had done its job poorly and selected a range of entirely unacceptable options, the worst that could happen would be that Canadians would return to the status quo.

Such a process would, I think, produce a majority in favour of change. What would the new electoral process look like in the end? Frankly, I don't know. And that's the whole point. I can support this process, Lorne Nystrom can support it, and so can members from all sides of the House, as long as each of us is confident in the wisdom of the people, and hopeful that the system that we ourselves prefer will, at some future date, get a fair hearing.

One of the great philosophers of the past century, John Rawls, wrote in his book *A Theory of Justice* of the impossibility of achieving a consensus on moving forward to a just society as long as participants in the process know who the winners and the losers will be. He proposed a thought-experiment in which each person's position within the existing and largely unjust state of affairs is hidden from view behind what he referred to as a "veil of ignorance." In such a situation all would endorse the new and more just state of things in an improved society, because everybody would have a greater possibility of being a net winner than of being a net loser.

Let us take the model proposed by this great philosopher as our own. Advancing together, with self-interest set aside behind a Rawlsian veil and with an improved democracy clearly in our view, let's all agree to change and to improve the way in which members are elected to the House of Commons.