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# **PROPORTIONAL REPRESENTATION: LESSONS FROM ONTARIO**

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Were I in charge of the Yes campaign in Ontario's referendum on electoral reform, the morning after winning 37% of the vote, I would have issued a press release saying: "The people have spoken, and we accept their verdict with humility. Clearly, we have been given a sweeping mandate to implement our platform, and we pledge to put our majority to good use."

Well, why not? The 37% of Ontario voters who voted in favour of the proposed mixed member proportional (MMP) scheme is within a few percentage points of the 42% who voted for Dalton McGuinty's Liberals, who were variously said to have won a massive, historic, decisive majority. It was about as many as voted for the "majority" NDP government in 1990, or the "majority" federal Liberal government in 1997.

Actually, what is remarkable is that the vote was as high as it was. Consider that few voters, according to the polls, even knew there was a referendum on, or that of those who did only a fraction would have known the provenance of the proposal before them -- that it had not just popped out of somebody's head, but had emerged from months of deliberation, study and debate by the Citizens' Assembly, whose proceedings received virtually no coverage from the major media.

And this very knowledgeable and engaged minority, had it followed the debate in the papers -- so far as there was a debate in the papers -- would have been confronted with a uniformly negative view of the proposal. Every one of the Toronto broadsheets weighed in heavily against it, and every columnist for those papers did likewise -- all except me, and Rick Salutin.

Voters were told that PR would mean a parliament filled with dozens of wacky fringe parties, or worse. Extremists, racists, separatists, every conceivable

demon was summoned out of the pundits' imagination to frighten the public: governments held hostage by radical fringe groups; clusters of appointed hacks permanently ensconced on the public payroll, the works. But then, imagination was all they had, since no country that actually uses PR demonstrates any of these pathologies.

No matter: undeterred, opponents rummaged around for more convenient caricatures. Ontario would turn into Israel, some claimed. Or was it Belgium? Maybe Weimar Germany? That none of these countries' systems remotely resemble MMP was likewise of no consequence. What are facts, compared to some half-remembered anecdote about the Knesset somebody once read somewhere?

And yet, in the face of this blizzard of misinformation, 37% of Ontario voters -- three in eight -- voted to scrap the first past the post system in favour of a system few of them would even have heard of until six weeks before. If not quite a ringing endorsement of MMP, it suggests a significant level of dissatisfaction with the status quo -- a conclusion amplified by the abysmal turnout, a historic low of 52%.

Still, it wasn't enough. As much of the blame as might be attached to Elections Ontario's incompetent handling of the referendum, or the suppression of the Citizens Assembly's report, or the government, or the media, the fact remains that reform proponents failed to win the support of enough Ontarians to carry the day. If I may, I might suggest a couple of other lessons.

One, it matters *which model* of reform you choose. In British Columbia, a similar citizens' assembly recommended the single transferable vote, as used in Ireland and Australia. They got 58% of the vote, and carried 77 of 79 ridings. So if the premise was that MMP was an easier "sell" than STV, that premise has been exploded.

And two, it matters *how you argue* for reform. The case for proportional representation has traditionally been presented as a matter of fairness at election time: making every vote count and all that. But as a very wise person put it to me, "*people aren't upset about how politicians are elected, they're upset about what they do when they're in power.*"

To which the answer is: yes, but what they do in power is intimately connected to how they are elected -- to the incentives built into first past the post.

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But first, a review of the more traditional arguments...

First-past-the-post is the only system in which the plurality, rather than the majority rules. That is, the candidate with the most votes in a riding wins, regardless of whether he has a half, a fourth or a tenth of the votes.

A party may win a large majority of the seats with only a minority of the votes -- in some cases, with less votes even than their "defeated" rivals. At the other extreme, a party may win a substantial share of the popular vote, yet have no legislative representation at all.

These problems are particularly acute in a large, regionally diverse country such as ours. For then the system's distortions are not random, but systemic. A party with broad, evenly distributed support across the nation will win relatively few ridings; whereas the party that clusters its votes geographically, by appealing to narrow regional concerns, will be rewarded with bushels of seats.

The present system, then, creates a wholly false image of the country, based on illusory majorities and exaggerated regionalism, as harmful to the legitimacy of government as it is to national unity.

In a less distortionary system, the representation of the parties in Parliament would be spread more evenly across the country. There would be more Tories from Ontario and Atlantic Canada, more Liberals from the West, more federalist MPs from Quebec—and fewer Bloquistes. In short, we would have a Parliament that looked more like Canada, and less like, I don't know, the European Union. Our politics would split more on questions of ideology and less on regional or linguistic lines.

But the most unconscionable effect of first-past-the-post is not that it discriminates between parties. It's that it discriminates between voters. The voter who sides with the winning candidate in his riding gets full representation in Parliament. The two thirds or more of voters who sided with another candidate get none. It took about 43,000 voters to elect each Tory or Liberal MP in the last federal election. The NDP, on the other hand, with 2.6 million voters, won only 29 seats -- or about 90,000 votes per seat -- while the Bloc Quebecois, with just 1.6 million voters, got 51 seats: roughly one for every 30,000 voters.

In other words, one Bloc vote was worth about three NDP votes -- while the 650,000 voters who supported the Greens found their vote was worth nothing at all. This is simply insupportable.

And not just supporters of small parties are shut out. The feeling will be familiar to voters for the Conservatives or Liberals who happen to live in areas where they are in the minority...

Ah, but what about those "stable majorities" first-past-the-post advocates are always on about...

The pretense that FPTP delivers "stable majorities" can no longer be sustained: recent elections in Ontario have produced, in order, NDP, Conservative, and Liberal governments, none with a majority of the votes, yet each interpreting the support of its own minority as a mandate to impose a succession of radically different policy regimes on the rest of us.

So far as it does deliver majority governments, it is only achieved by misrepresenting voters' true preferences. Or as a National Post editorial put it, "our system permits majority governments to emerge even from closely contested elections," that is, from elections in which no party enjoyed the support of a majority of the voters, but only a plurality -- and sometimes not even that. It delivers, not what the voters want, but what its proponents prefer they should have.

Why this should be considered desirable or necessary is a mystery. If the public wanted a strong majority government, all it has to do is elect one. If a majority of voters cannot be mustered in favour of any particular party -- if, that is to say, the majority votes against giving any party a majority -- perhaps that is what the voters prefer. What the Post would prefer, apparently, is institutionalized dishonesty: The people should be given a majority government, whether they vote for it or not.

But in fact the distortions of FPTP do not necessarily lead to stability, or majorities. It is precisely because of FPTP's tendency to over-represent parties that concentrate their vote geographically, like the Bloc Quebecois, that no party can now form a majority. Instead, we now have a parliament made up of what are essentially three regional parties, plus the NDP.

On the other hand, if it's entrenched dynasties you want, FPTP can give you that, too. Why? Because in anything but a two-party system, the random accidents of split-votes mean a party doesn't have to get a majority of the vote to get a majority of the seats: as we've seen, it can do so with as little as 37%.

The fundamental difference between the two systems, then, is not which one tends to produce majority governments and which to produce minorities, but on what basis either result occurs.

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Apologists for the status quo have more or less given up arguing for first past the post on its merits.

So instead first-past-the-posties have focused on raising fears about the alternative. Thus we are told that changing the system will result in chronic instability, a series of minority governments, one falling after the other; or else that it will lead to chronic gridlock, a legislature divided into dozens of smaller parties, some extremist, who would use their bargaining power to hijack the political process, demanding that one or other of the mainstream parties adopt their agenda in return for their support. The spectres of Israel and Italy are often invoked, as if to cinch the argument.

We can dispose of the last easily enough. One: Israel and Italy are uniquely divided societies, and were long before they adopted PR. Two: Neither country has ever used anything like the system proposed, but rather adopted much more

extreme forms of PR, with no threshold for support.

As for the more specific fears, they would perhaps be more tenable were we the first country ever to try proportional representation -- were it not already in use, in one form or another, in most of the democratic world. But in fact it is, and in no country have any of the scare stories come to pass.

Germany and New Zealand both use MMP. Their parliaments typically produce between four and eight parties, none of them extremist, with two large centrist parties as anchors. The same pattern is observed in other PR countries: Ireland, Australia, Norway, Sweden, and Denmark all currently have seven parties in their legislatures.

It's true that these systems do not typically produce one-party majority governments. Rather, they tend to be led by multi-party majorities: stable coalitions, that is, which together command the support of a majority of the legislature -- and, unlike the current system, a majority of the voters. We associate this sort of government with instability only because of the incentives under FPTP, which encourage parties to trigger an election at the first spike in the polls, betting that a 2% rise in support can translate into a bushel of extra seats. Under PR, there's no such payoff.

As for the prospect of extremist hijackings, that is supported neither by experience nor common sense, depending as it does on a number of increasingly unlikely conditions: that the extremist party has just enough seats to hold the balance of power; that none of the larger parties' members break ranks, but rigidly vote the party line; that, likewise, the mainstream parties are incapable of voting with one another to defeat the extremists; and, most importantly, that none of the parties, large or small, pays any price for their behaviour with the electorate.

That's not what happened in New Zealand, for example, where the New Zealand First party (better described as eccentric than extremist), having made what were regarded as extravagant demands, was thrown out of the governing coalition -- and thumped at the next election. Or Germany, where the Social Democrats and Christian Democratic Union opted to form a grand coalition in 2005 rather than share power with more radical parties.

Indeed, it's the present system that's hostage to minorities -- or one minority in particular. That is, that very small minority, two or three percent of the vote, called the "swing voters," to whom the parties are utter slaves.

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The mindless partisanship, the obsession with swing voters and wedge issues, the absence of serious policy debates, everything that people hate about the present system -- when they're not being told it's all that stands between them and Israel or Italy or Weimar Germany -- all are a product of the absurdly

leveraged outcomes, a two percent swing in the vote translates into 50 seats.

That has to be the emphasis now -- not on what happens on election day every four or five years, but on what happens every day in between.

Parties are simply responding to the incentives in our political system. It should really be called the "winner take all" system, since that captures its most essential dynamic.

Whoever gets the most votes in a riding, no matter how few, wins; they may only have 25% of the vote, but they get 100% of the representation. Likewise in the aggregate: a third of the vote is commonly sufficient to win two-thirds of the seats -- and all of the power.

In such a system, as we have seen, victory or defeat can turn on the swing of one or two percentage points.

Living on a knife-edge does strange things to people. On the one hand, it leaves the parties in a perpetual fever of anticipation, convinced they have only to gain a few points in the polls to destroy their opponents. That is one reason the two federal conservative parties, Progressive Conservative and Reform, were so reluctant to merge. It is also the reason why minority governments tend, under our system, to be so unstable.

On the other hand, the consequences of losing a few points makes them excessively, almost neurotically cautious, unwilling to take the slightest risk or advocate the mildest change, but each hugging as close as it can to the median voter, the status quo and each other. Hence the dominance of the two brokerage parties, indistinguishable in philosophy -- alike, that is, in the lack of it.

Put the two together, and you have much of Canadian politics -- viciously partisan, yet unspeakably trivial; much ado about nothing much.

Supporters of FPTP like to say it makes it easier to "throw the bums out." But wouldn't it be better if we had a system that didn't let them become bums in the first place?

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The case for electoral reform, it seems to me, is one that conservatives, if not Conservatives, should find appealing. It is a cause that has tended, historically, to be identified with the left, not least in the current referendum debate; many conservatives have accordingly rejected it. Yet it is not the left that has suffered most under the current system. It's the right.

By whatever combination of historical circumstances, the left has a party that will advance its ideas, free of the brokerage parties' grip: the NDP. Though not often in government, outside of the West, it has succeeded in dragging the entire

political spectrum to the left, its policies adopted by Liberal and Conservative governments alike. Nothing like it exists on the right, federally or provincially, nor has since Reform's demise. Nor is one likely to emerge, so long as "first past the post" remains the rule.

The same is true of parties less easily categorized, like the Green party. Though it is the party of choice for hundreds of thousands of Canadians, it has yet to win a seat, unable to concentrate its support geographically in the way that FPTP requires. How many more votes might it win if potential supporters were not disheartened at the prospect of "wasting" their votes, or worse, "splitting" the vote, as they are forever warned against doing?

But what if there were a system in which no votes were wasted, where vote-splitting ceased to be an issue? Not only the Greens, but other parties -- libertarian, social-conservative, or other -- might then have a fighting chance. The spectrum of acceptable ideas for debate would noticeably broaden.

Moreover, because the "winner take all" dynamic would have been broken, all parties would have less fear of taking risks. True, there would also be less upside: progress would only come by sustained advocacy over many years. Conservatives grouse that a Mike Harris revolution would be unlikely, but so would the NDP disaster that preceded it.

So conservatives, genuine conservatives, have a choice. Hold onto the current system, and hope for a Harris-style change of government every fifty years or so. Or take a chance on something new, and start changing minds today.

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To recap: our present, plurality voting system greatly exaggerates the support of the first-place finisher, handing a minority of the voters a majority of the seats -- and all of the power. It favours established parties over new, regional over broadly-based, with corresponding inequities between voters.

Indeed, it leaves most voters effectively disenfranchised -- their votes elect no one -- even as it sends the parties chasing after a tiny sliver of swing voters, suppressing meaningful differences of ideology in favour of a few overhyped wedge issues. The result: long stretches of centrist monotony, broken by wild, almost accidental lurches to the left or right.

Proportional representation, on the other hand, makes every vote count, and every vote equal. As such it ensures majority governments really do represent a majority, whether under one party's banner or in coalitions. It opens up the political market to new competitors, and encourages parties to compete in healthier ways: by the earned increments of persuasion, rather than winner-take-all bets on split votes and other vagaries of the current system.

So in principle the case for PR has been made, notwithstanding the alarmist

fears of its opponents -- of paralysis and instability, of parties “breeding like rabbits” and extremists holding parliament to ransom -- fears notably unsupported by actual experience in the scores of democratic countries around the world that use PR.

To close: If a people gets the government they deserve, shouldn't they at least get the government they voted for?