First things first: Making every vote count

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A referendum on electoral reform is coming next year. Terry Dance-Bennink of Fair Vote Canada explains why it’s important.

DURING LAST MAY’S PROVINCIAL ELECTION CAMPAIGN, electoral reform was a central promise of the Green Party’s campaign, while the NDP promised a referendum on it. The new government has now made it official: Before the end of 2018, BC citizens will have a mail-in referendum on electoral reform.

We’ve had two votes on it before: In 2005, after a Citizen’s Assembly recommended a single-transferrable vote (STV), resulting in a 57.69 percent vote in favour of it—but falling short of the government’s insistence on 60 percent; and then again in 2009, when 60.91 percent voted against STV.

This time the government has promised that a 50 percent-plus-one vote to replace our first-past-the-post system will be honoured.

So the year ahead is a pivotal one. During it, British Columbians will need to educate themselves on how best to modernize the voting system so that it allows for the fairest representation in all the land. If the vote is in favour of replacing first-past-the-post, we will have entered a new era that sees BC leading the way on electoral reform nationally.

But enroute to that shining future, some are predicting divisive debates on the question and on how riding boundaries may have to be redrawn. Meanwhile, proponents are warning that if the referendum fails this time, it will be likely decades before any party would revisit the question.

Among the most knowledgeable people locally on the subject is Terry Dance-Bennink, who is pretty much a full-time volunteer with Fair Vote Canada (FVC), a national, multi-partisan organization with chapters all over Canada and 12,000 BC supporters (see www.fairvote.ca).

She’s just the type of active retiree Victoria thrives on. Formerly a vice-president academic of Fleming College in Peterborough, Ontario, Dance-Bennink moved to Victoria 12 years ago. She devoted her first few years to Dogwood Initiative—again as a full-time volunteer, and has championed various campaigns for democratic rights—stopping the Kinder Morgan pipeline among them.

Currently, Dance-Bennink serves as the chair of Fair Vote Canada’s BC Steering Committee and is a member of the BC Referendum Alliance Steering Committee. She graciously answered some key questions about the promised referendum and electoral reform.

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*Terry Dance-Benninck*

**Q.** Why did you get involved in Fair Vote Canada?

**A.** I’ve always been passionate about human rights, and fair voting is a basic right—it underlines all other rights. I grew up in the 60s and have supported many citizen-led campaigns around issues like adult education, climate change, pipelines, cancer prevention, and indigenous rights.

But I’m tired of hitting my head against the wall. I’ve rarely helped elect someone who shares my values and I’m not alone. I believe our election system is the real obstacle. In Canada and BC, we constantly end up with false-majority governments that represent only a minority of voters, and often the most privileged. In the last provincial election, almost 50 percent of BC voters cast ballots that did not help elect a representative.

What does this say about our democracy and our ability to influence the decisions we care about? We need a voting system that makes every vote count, so all voices are heard and policies reflect the wishes of a genuine majority of BC voters. That’s why I joined Fair Vote Canada (FVC) and am now leading our BC team as we prepare to win the referendum.

**Q.** Why do you believe the current system of first-past-the-post needs to change?

**A.** We live in the 21st not the 15th century, when first-past-the-post was first invented! It’s time we joined more than 90 western democracies using proportional representation [PR]. Countries like Germany, New Zealand and Sweden have higher voter turnout because their people know their votes really matter, no matter who they vote for or where they live.

BC is a rich province with educated citizens, so surely we can help all citizens participate in decision-making, not just the most powerful or the first to race past the post.

**Q.** With the BC government’s official October announcement that a referendum on electoral reform will be held by the end of November 2018, were you pleasantly or otherwise surprised? Do you like the idea of the mail-in vote?

**A.** I was delighted to see the NDP, with support from the Greens, honour their election promise to hold a referendum on PR and campaign in favour of the change. What a contrast to our federal government. Once Trudeau secured a majority, he disowned his electoral reform pledge in order to maintain power. He may pay the price for this in 2019. And yes, I’m fine with a mail-in vote which has been used in past referendums in BC, but I’d also like to see some in-person voting options, particularly for students, along with broad public education. There needs to be a fair funding formula for the two sides, one that rewards individual and educational contact and donations (perhaps through a matching grant system) rather than encouraging massive media campaigns. We want to avoid what happened in 2009 when the “no” side used their $500,000 to pay for fear-mongering ads, while the “yes” side organized at a grassroots level. Finally, I also want assurance from the government that it will honour the result, regardless of voter turnout. We want explicit confirmation, as the PEI Liberal premier discounted a favourable vote for mixed-member proportional representation [MMP] last year based on “low voter turnout”—after the fact! Our government could include this in forth-coming regulations. Voter turnout in municipal elections is often extremely low but always considered valid.

**Q.** When will we know what the question will be? What do you think would be the ideal question(s)—and why? Why is the question so important?

**A.** That’s the million dollar question! The question dictates the outcome—it’s that important. Our research shows that referendums that force citizens to choose between first-past-the-post and a proportional system have nearly all failed.

I’m glad the government plans to consult further before deciding on the best question(s). The public will be able to weigh in on what the question should be at the government’s new website, due to be up any day now. We should see clarity by early in the new year. The bottom line, however, is that 65 percent of BC voters want to move to a proportional system of voting (Angus Reid Poll, Sept 26, 2017) and support runs across all demographics. This gives the government a solid mandate.

FVC has presented a number of recommendations to government and we’ve suggested a generic question such as: Do you agree we should modernize the way we elect our MLAs through a proportional system that both preserves local representation and ensures the popular vote is better reflected in the composition of the Legislature?

If the government decides to invite voters’ views on specific PR options, we recommend this be done through a second question, using a ranked ballot with various PR options, as was done recently in PEI’s plebiscite.

But let’s not get into the weeds. We want to avoid a debate over an alphabet soup of electoral mechanics. Once you’ve chosen a plane to fly, you don’t need to know how it’s designed and how the costs are counted. Just that it will fly you to your destination, namely the land of fair representation. The real questions are: Should as many votes as possible count? Should voters be able to express their preferences? Should diversity of candidates be enhanced? Should we maintain some form of local representation? Should every politician be accountable to voters? Should parties work together? Should we be able to vote with our hearts instead of “strategically”?

**Q.** Can you give examples of the experiences with MPP and STV in other countries that have used them?

**A.** I listened to many of the international experts testify before the federal committee on electoral reform last year, and I was sure impressed with the 90 countries using PR, regardless of the system favoured. MMP is used in countries like Germany and New Zealand, STV in Australia and Ireland, but all share in common a higher voter turnout, reduced policy lurches, collaboration among parties, high scores on environmental performance and quality of life, and greater diversity of elected officials.

Fair Vote Canada believes there are three broad categories of PR voting systems: those that involve multi-member ridings; those that call for regional top-up seats; or a combination of both. And just to be clear, FVC doesn’t endorse any one system as “the best.” We’ll support any made-for-BC model that is truly proportional and reflects our diversity.

**Q.** How do you answer the critique that proportional representation is likely to be unfair to rural areas—which now enjoy a better ratio of representation than do urban voters?

**A.** The so-called rural/urban divide is a tactic of those opposed to proportional representation. In the 2009 referendum, the tactic was “PR is too complicated!” Now it’s “PR hurts rural voters.”

When I look at the map of 2017 election results, I see big swaths of red in rural areas, and orange/green in more urban and Island ridings. But half of BC voters outside of Metro Vancouver and the Island chose a party other than the BC Liberals, and yet the Liberals won 83 percent of the seats in those areas. In Metro Vancouver and the Island, the NDP won 64 percent of the seats with only 44 percent of the vote.

Proportional representation doesn’t shift the balance of seats between urban and rural BC at all. Instead it gives every voter within every region a voice. And all models of proportional representation have strong local and regional representation. Voters will keep local MLAs and no seats will move to the cities. Every region will be rewarded with a team of representatives. And most importantly, all regions will have MLAs who are part of the government, rather than regions being shut out. Finally, teamwork among MLAs in a district  [even in different parties] promotes good regional decision-making.

**Q.** What systems still allow for the greatest “place-based” system, i.e. each community or riding would have a specific representative who knows the area—and the riding wouldn’t be overwhelmingly large?

**A.** There are several great “made-for-BC” proportional options. They all maintain strong local representation and more voter choice. I’m thinking of systems like MMP, Local PR, and Rural-Urban PR. FVC has prepared a User Guide to PR Options that goes into depth on these and shows sample ballots.

**Q.** Regardless of the form of proportional representation, it seems that riding boundaries would have to be revised. Would it make sense to have riding boundaries mirror those of the federal ridings, i.e., 42 BC ridings, with two MLAs elected from each?

**A.** I think it’s too early to comment on riding boundaries. Some proportional models use existing boundaries, some require a degree of redistribution. But they all make every voter count and maintain strong local and regional representation. Let’s look first at what we want our electoral system to deliver—fairer results and better government.

**Q.** Another complaint, particularly with STV, which was recommended by the Citizen’s Assembly in 2005, is that it’s too complicated. What do you think—can you explain it in a simple fashion?

**A.** If you can use a cell phone, you can vote in a PR system! Most people today have no problem placing an X beside a single candidate. What about an X beside a local as well as a regional MLA—two “Xs”? No big deal. Or ranking several candidates in order of preference? Again, it’s not complicated. We’re asked to choose and rank options all the time by pollsters and  companies and in choosing party leadership candidates.

The ballot isn’t the problem. It’s true, the counting mechanism can be more complicated, depending on the system chosen, but that’s up to experts at Elections BC to master, not the voter. I don’t have to be a flight engineer to know which plane I want to fly.

Most voters are more interested in the outcomes than mechanics. They want fairer results, more efficient and collaborative governments, and accountable representatives. Proportional representation will deliver on all of these.

Opponents of PR will say every model is too complicated. They don’t give British Columbians enough credit—we are as smart as voters in New Zealand and Ireland.

**Q.** Speaking of the Citizen’s Assembly, that body took 18 months to come up with what they believed was the best or most democratic system. Are we rushing it to have a referendum in 2018?

**A.** The Citizens’ Assembly was a world-class democratic process which did amazing work on behalf of BC voters. So a lot of work has already been done. And 15 commissions/assemblies in Canada have recommended PR and models that are adaptable to BC. We don’t need to re-invent the wheel. The government needs to look at the excellent work that has already been done and deliver on what’s always been missing in the past—leadership.

**Q.** Premier Horgan has stated that his government will campaign on behalf of an alternative to first-past-the-post—and that he will accept “50 percent plus 1” as a mandate for change. How would you advise people to prepare themselves to vote in the referendum?

**A.** Get involved and get informed! The campaign for proportional representation is gearing up. We expect lots of town halls and community-led discussions, along with a government-led social media engagement strategy this fall/winter. Contact your local MLA. And join one of our local FVC chapters (visit[https://fairvote.ca](https://fairvote.ca/) for chapter contacts and resources). You can also reach me directly at tmdance@shaw.ca.

It’s our third time up to bat in BC, and it better be a home run. Just think of how this could impact the 2019 federal election—BC can lead Canada!

*Leslie Campbell is the founding editor of*Focus*. Please write with your views on this important subject: Do you feel like your vote has counted? Do you feel fairly represented in government? What system do your prefer? Email focusedit@shaw.ca.*

* [Report Article](http://www.focusonvictoria.ca/novdec2017/first-things-first-making-every-vote-count-r15/?do=report&d=26&id=15)