

*The 2005-06*



# John Kenneth Galbraith lectureship in public policy

Inco Innovation Centre Memorial University St. John's, NL March 8, 2006

## Doing Democracy Differently

Is it Time for Electoral Reform in Canada?

Dr. R. Kenneth Carty

*The 2005-06*



# John Kenneth Galbraith lectureship in public policy

Inco Innovation Centre Memorial University St. John's, NL March 8, 2006

## Doing Democracy Differently

Is it Time for Electoral Reform in Canada?

Dr. R. Kenneth Carty

---

# Doing Democracy Differently: Is it Time for Electoral Reform in Canada?

## Synopsis

Canadians have lost faith in their political system. Fragmented parties, successive minority governments, and provincial elections that produce illogical results — all are signs that electoral reform is a pressing issue.

Citizens are increasingly eager to address the “democratic deficit” by changing the way governments are elected. The issue is bubbling up from the provinces — at least half of whom have actively engaged the question of electoral reform. Most are recommending some form of proportional representation system to replace the current “first-past-the-post” system.

In his Galbraith lecture, Dr. R. Kenneth Carty explains what provincial initiatives reveal about the possibility of genuine democratic reform. Dr. Carty is one of Canada’s foremost authorities on electoral systems. A professor of political science at the University of British Columbia, he was the chief research officer on BC's Citizens’ Assembly, an independent, non-partisan project that saw 160 citizens examine the province’s electoral system.

His lecture took place on Wednesday evening, March 8, 2006, in the Inco Innovation Building on the campus of Memorial University. His lecture was broadcast live on the House of Assembly television channel throughout Newfoundland and Labrador, and was also webcast “live”. The lecture can be downloaded from the website of the Leslie Harris Centre of Regional Policy and Development, at:

[www.mun.ca/harriscentre/Galbraith/Carty/GL.php](http://www.mun.ca/harriscentre/Galbraith/Carty/GL.php).

Doing Democracy Differently  
Is it Time for Electoral Reform in Canada?

Dr. R. Kenneth Carty

The 2005-06 John Kenneth Galbraith Lectureship in Public Policy

Leslie Harris Centre of Regional Policy and Development  
Memorial University of Newfoundland  
St. John's, NL A1C 5S7  
[www.mun.ca/harriscentre](http://www.mun.ca/harriscentre)

---

## John Kenneth Galbraith Lecture in Public Policy

The John Kenneth Galbraith Lectureship in Public Policy is intended to bring to Memorial University outstanding figures whose work reflects their commitment to excellence in scholarship and public affairs. The lectureship is an initiative of Memorial University and is one of the major events open to the general public during the academic year.

It is named in honour of the late John Kenneth Galbraith — the internationally-renowned economist who was awarded an honorary doctorate of letters at Memorial's 1999 fall convocation. Dr. Galbraith was the Paul M. Warburg Professor of Economics emeritus at Harvard University, and was known for his development of Keynesian and post-Keynesian economics; the economics of the modern large firm; as well as for his writing and his active involvement in American politics.

The purpose of the lectureship is to expose faculty, students, public servants and the general public to timely and significant public policy issues. The lectureship is a window to the larger world of public policy and is meant to put important and complex issues in context.

---

## Welcome and Introduction

### **Dr. Axel Meisen** **President and Vice-Chancellor of Memorial University**

It is my great pleasure to welcome you here this evening to the fourth John Kenneth Galbraith Lectureship in Public Policy. We have a very distinguished speaker here this evening, but before he has been formally introduced, I would like to say a few words about how the lectureship came about. This lectureship was made possible by a generous donation which Dr. Galbraith made to Memorial University. You may recall that Dr. Galbraith received an honorary doctorate degree from Memorial in October of 1999, and it was during that visit to our province that he spoke eloquently and persuasively about the need for vigorous debate on public policy issues. From this visit arose the idea of a lectureship, and Dr. Galbraith kindly lent his name, and provided financial support, for this initiative. This support allows us to fund the visit of one eminent speaker per year.

I would like to note that we are broadcasting tonight's lecture on the House of Assembly's channel throughout Newfoundland and Labrador and, as well, we are web-casting it on the world wide web. We will also be producing a DVD of tonight's lecture, copies of which will be available from the Harris Centre. I will have the pleasure of delivering a copy of the DVD to Dr. Galbraith, who unfortunately could not travel to St. John's to be with us here tonight. With this in mind, I would like to extend my thanks to you, Dr. Galbraith, for your support of Memorial University, for its students, for its faculty and for all the people of this province, all of whom will benefit from this lectureship.

Dr. Galbraith's connection to our province and our university did not begin with his honorary degree in 1999. He visited our province many times before, and on a previous occasion, he was a speaker in Memorial's Angel Lecture. During the war years, he visited Newfoundland frequently and became very knowledgeable about our province. Premier Smallwood also consulted him from time to time. What you may not know is that in

the 1960s, Premier Smallwood – according to legend – offered Dr. Galbraith the presidency of Memorial University. (In those times, search committees were not widely known, particularly not if you know Premier Smallwood.) However, Dr. Galbraith declined. It is interesting to speculate what this university would have been like if he had in fact become president and vice-chancellor.

The aim of the Galbraith lectureship is to attract outstanding individuals whose work reflects the commitment to excellence, scholarship and public affairs as exemplified by John Kenneth Galbraith. In addition to delivering the lecture, the lecturer typically also speaks with students, faculty and public servants on a variety of public issues, and our lecturer this evening has already done so, and will do more of it before he leaves.

His predecessors as Galbraith lecturers were the Honourable Dr. Lloyd Axworthy, the Honourable Roy Romanow, and Mr. Jeffrey Simpson. This evening, we have not only the pleasure to welcome our Galbraith lecturer, but he is also accompanied by his wife, Elaine Carty, who is an outstanding scholar and practitioner in the field of midwifery at the University of British Columbia. She told me early on that she was the instigator of the degree which carries the title of Bachelor of Midwifery – the only degree that gives you a BMW. The doctors love it. So with those few words of introduction, I would like to call upon Dr. Steve Wolinetz, the interim dean of the Faculty of Arts, to introduce our speaker, Dr. Kenneth Carty, who is a wonderful person and former colleague of mine, as is Elaine Carty.

---

## Introduction of the Guest Lecturer

### **Dr. Steven Wolinetz** Interim Dean of Arts

It is a pleasure to introduce an old friend of some 30 years. Our speaker tonight is Dr. R. Kenneth Carty. Ken Carty, as most of us know him, is a professor of Political Science at the University of British Columbia, where he currently holds the Brenda and David McLean Chair in Canadian Studies. A graduate of the University of New Brunswick, he went on to be a Rhodes Scholar at Jesus College, Oxford, and earned his PhD from Queen's University. Dr. Carty is a former head of the Department of Political Science at the University of British Columbia and a past president of the Canadian Political Science Association. He has also been a consultant to national and provincial Royal Commissions, to the CBC Ombudsman, and to the Chief Electoral Officer of Canada. He was a member of the last Federal Electoral Boundaries Commission for British Columbia, and in 2003-4, served as director of Research for the BC Citizens' Assembly on Electoral Reform.

His research has primarily been concerned with political parties and electoral systems. He is the author and co-author of 11 volumes and over 60 articles on politics in Europe, Australia and Canada. His research combines careful analysis of data with rich description and effective argument. It is no understatement to say that his work is central to the study of Canadian parties and Canadian politics. His most recent book (with Dr. Monroe Eagles) is *Politics is Local: National Politics at the Grassroots*. His talk tonight stems both from his research and from his experience as research director of the British Columbia Citizens' Assembly. Seconded from classroom teaching with his colleague Dr. Campbell Sharman, he advised an unusual exercise in participatory democracy and citizen involvement. In keeping with the Galbraith Lecture, and the scholar-practitioner after whom it is named, Dr. Carty's topic is, "Doing Democracy Differently: Is it Time for Electoral Reform?"

---

## Doing Democracy Differently: Is it Time for Electoral Reform?

**Dr. R. Kenneth Carty**

I first should thank Steve for his very kind and generous introduction. He has long been a valued colleague of the political science community in this country and a good friend. It is an honour to be invited to this important institution and this great university and particularly to the Galbraith Lectureship. It's always a treat to come to Newfoundland.

Some years ago I was a young academic at a conference at a college in northern British Columbia. It was on one of those 1970s conferences on the future of Canada. I was seated beside a relatively well-known provincial politician, and in the conference package was a map of Canada, you know, the kind they give you in these conference packages when they don't have much else to put in. And I thought, well this is an opportunity to get this politician to sign the map and I'll have it as a souvenir. I assumed this provincial politician would just have a modest little signature, written across his province, but it was not to be so. His sprawling "Joseph R. Smallwood" covered the map from sea to sea. That map now hangs in a hall outside my study in our house and it is a reminder of that moment, that conference and that conversation, but more powerfully for me, it's a reminder that wherever we are in this country – this country of regions – we are all part of a common political community.

And it's about the state and character of the democracy of that community that I have been asked to talk tonight. I have a number of questions I think we ought to talk about. When the question is electoral reform, people are likely to ask, "why are we taking about that?" Surely there are more important things – there is education policy and health care policy and the role of our defence forces in the world. Whatever are we talking about electoral reform for? Is this an important policy area? Is this something we ought to be concerned with? So, I have to start with that.

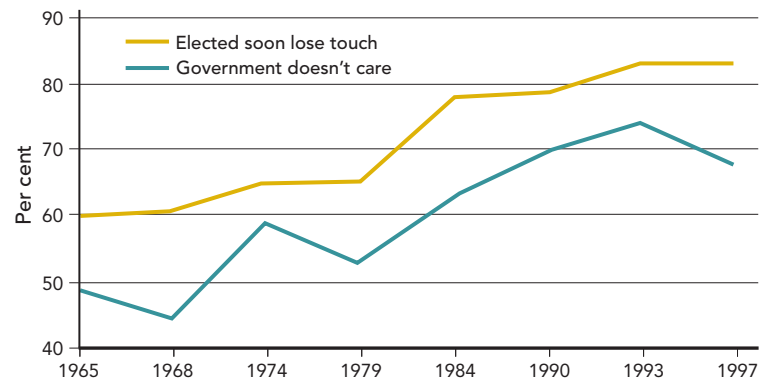
And then I have to ask, “why are we talking about it now?” because it has come on the agenda and suddenly it has become a topic of some considerable attention and interest across this country. So I want to say something about that.

Then I have to turn to the question, “if it’s on the agenda, how do we go about doing electoral reform?” It’s a peculiar policy area, of course, because politicians have a special and a particular vested interest in it and in the rules of the game in which they live. And so, doing electoral reform, like constitutional reform, is often more difficult than doing other kinds of policy reforms. But if we’re going to do it, what should we do? And given that a lot of people are trying to do it across the country, how come there are so many different schemes? Why can’t there be any kind of agreement on how we ought to tackle this issue?

And finally, “are there any prospects for real change?” If people agree that it’s time for electoral reform, is there any prospect that this will in fact happen?

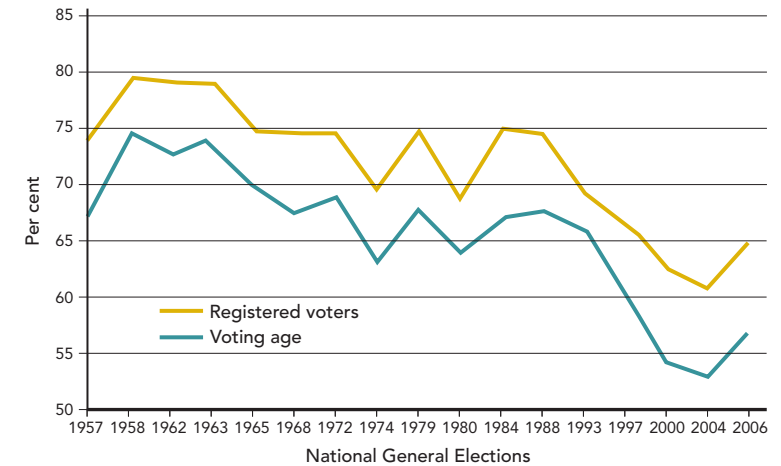
The discussion starts with a growing concern for the character and the health of our democracy. Here are a couple of simple pictures (see Fig. 1 and Fig. 2).

**Fig. 1 - Growing Cynicism**



We can see that, over the last three decades, there has been a growing sense amongst the population that, once politicians get elected, they

**Fig. 2 - Election Turnout 1957-2006**



soon lose touch with the people who elected them. There has also been a steady slow growth from the 1960s in the number of people who say that the government simply doesn’t care. So there’s been a growing change in public attitudes about the political system, a change that threatens to undermine the legitimacy of our democracy. And that’s been reflected in the behaviour of these same Canadians. Voter turnout has steadily dropped since its heyday in the Diefenbaker years when Progressive Conservative leader Diefenbaker’s appeal attracted large numbers of people to the polls. What started as a steady decline has, in the last couple of decades, turned into a very sharp decline.

The solid line in the second graph is the proportion of people on the voters’ list who actually voted, while the dotted line shows the proportion of people who are of voting age who actually voted. You can see that by 2004, it got down to 52 or 53 per cent; it popped up a little bit last January, but still it is in the range of American presidential elections – which we used to decry in this country. There is a growing sense of an underlying crisis within the political system. More and more people are beginning to think about the long-term meaning, as well as the consequences, of these attitudinal and behavioural trends. So where



do we start thinking about the state of our democracy, where do we start with the problem?

Well, I am an academic so I will start you with a pop quiz! That is the nature of our business, right? Let me ask you: what do the men pictured below have in common?



Answer: they all became Prime Minister in an election where the ‘other fellow’ got more votes. Now, we cannot blame Newfoundlanders for the first two (Laurier and King), you were not complicit in those choices. But of course you were part and parcel of the elections in which the other two Prime Ministers (Diefenbaker and Clark) won election. So we start with the recognition that we have an electoral system that has a curious dynamic – one that can reward ‘losers’. We have not had many Prime Ministers in our history, but four of them came to office when the majority of the population apparently preferred somebody else.

Does this happen in the provinces as well? It turns out that it does. We can produce a long list, but here in Table 1 are the names of just some of those we can recall who won elections when the other fellow or the other woman (well, actually I think in almost all cases it was a fellow) won more votes.

You can see that there are some significant names who have had an important impact on national politics here. Mr. Johnson in Quebec was one of those who helped slow the Quiet Revolution. Mr. Bouchard, of course, devoted his provincial career to trying to stifle Canada. Mr. Hatfield was a key player in the patriation of the Constitution and the acceptance of the Charter of Rights and Freedoms in his time, and Mr. Wells had his own unique role in the death of the Meech Lake Accord on the constitution.

Table 1 - More Recent “Wrong Winners”

Province	Premier	Party
Newfoundland and Labrador	Clyde Wells	Liberal
Nova Scotia	Gerry Regan	Liberal
New Brunswick	Richard Hatfield	Progressive Conservative
Quebec	Daniel Johnson Lucien Bouchard	Liberal Parti Québécois
Ontario	David Peterson	Liberal
Saskatchewan	Grant Devine Roy Romanow	Progressive Conservative New Democratic Party
British Columbia	Glen Clark	New Democratic Party

And you can see that there is nothing partisan about this; the phenomenon does not seem to reward one party over others. The list includes Liberals and Conservatives and Parti Québécois and New Democrats, and if you went back further you would find Social Credit and Union National parties on the list. If you go back further still, you will find similar cases in every province (with one exception of course, and that is Alberta, where they do not have contests where the other fellow can get more votes). But this does make us suspect the electoral process or, at the very least, force us ask questions about it.

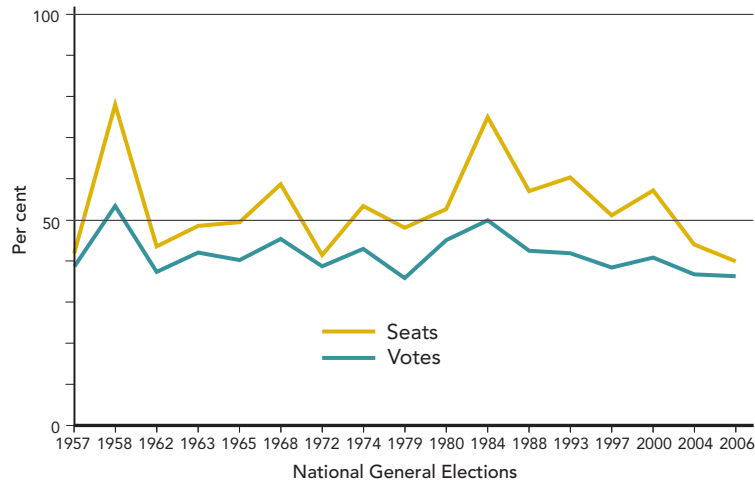
To start asking “why is this on the agenda, and what are people thinking about?” let us start by looking at some of the ways in which the system works.

The bottom line on the graph (see Fig. 3) is the share of the vote that the governing party – the winning party – received, while the top line is the share of the seats it won in the House of Commons. We can see that governments always get more seats than they would be entitled to on a strictly proportional basis. They always get a bonus. As you can see from the 50 per cent line, they often get a majority of seats without winning a majority of the votes.

So we have an electoral system which always gives governments more

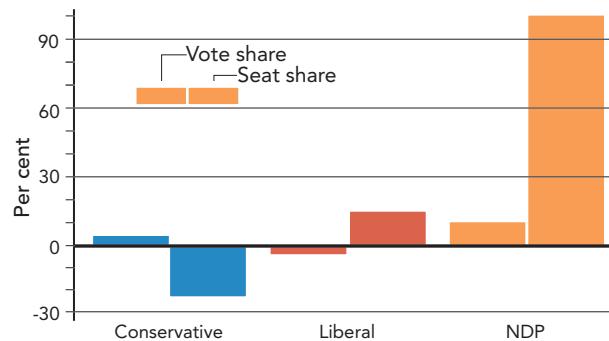


Fig. 3 - Government's Vote and Seat Shares



than their share, always over-rewards them and often creates a majority where they have no popular majority in the electorate. And it is an electoral system that is not very predictable or coherent, for there is no obvious relationship between votes and seats. As an example, consider what happened in my province of British Columbia during the election of last January (2006):

Fig. 4 - Seat-Vote connections: BC 2006

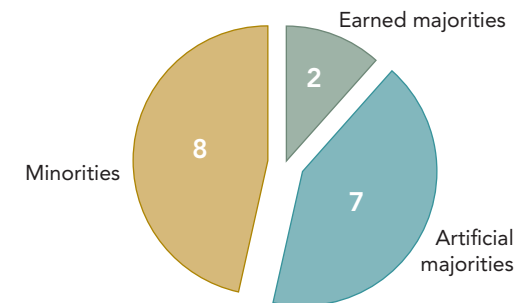


The Conservatives' votes went up but their seats went down. That seems odd. As for the Liberals, their vote share went down while their

seats actually went up! The New Democrats' votes went up just a little bit which resulted in a large jump in their seats. The reality is that there is nothing about the electoral system that will help us understand or predict those results. So, election after election, we use a system in which there is no logical or direct connection between the share of a party's votes and its share of seats. There is no predictability about it. There is no coherence of any kind.

The standard argument for the current system is that it gives us majority governments, and a majority government is a good thing. In order to guarantee a majority, perhaps it's not a bad thing for the system to fudge vote distributions a bit. So just how well the system has ensured majority government in Canada seems a fair question to ask. Here is the evidence (Fig. 5) from the last half century of national general elections.

Fig. 5 - Canadian Governments Since 1957



On two occasions the electoral system did not make any difference because the government won a majority of votes: Mr. Diefenbaker in 1958 and Mr. Mulroney in 1984. In the other 15 instances, this electoral system — whose principal claim to fame is that it provides a majority even if the voters will not — actually did so fewer times than not. With less than a 50 per cent success rate many have come to conclude that the system does not deliver what its defenders promise and, as a consequence, serious questions are being raised about its ability to make any contribution to good or legitimate government.

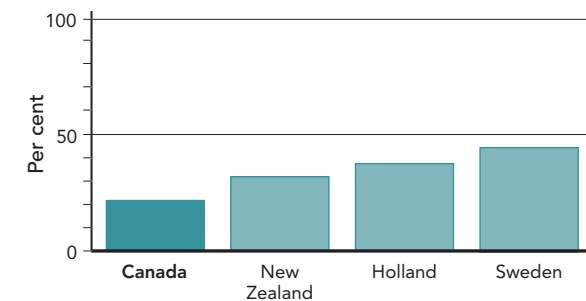
It is also a system that can be very dysfunctional in the smaller provincial legislatures because it often produces what we might simply call “the evisceration of opposition.” Here are two recent examples: in my province of British Columbia in 2001, the Liberals won 77 out of 79 seats while the outgoing NDP government retained only two. In Prince Edward Island in 2000, the Conservatives won all but one seat leaving the Liberals with a one-seat opposition. The truth is that parliamentary government simply does not work unless there exists a decent opposition. The system is rooted in the old British court system in which there was a prosecutor and a defender, both of whose sides needed to be heard. In the clash of their voices and ideas, the voters get to see what their alternatives are. However if the system decimates opposition parties, not allowing them a presence in the legislature, that creates a fundamental problem for effective or responsible parliamentary government. Premiers who have been in that situation, for instance Mr. Campbell in British Columbia or Mr. McKenna in New Brunswick, have recognized the real difficulties that this situation generates for making parliamentary government relevant and responsive.

Of all the provincial elections held in the last half century, over a quarter of them have resulted in the government winning 80 per cent of the seats or more. In many of our small provincial legislatures, that has effectively meant no real opposition existed. So, in a large proportion of the cases, we haven’t had a meaningful system of working parliamentary government in our provincial political communities.

We can also ask how does the electoral system do in terms of providing some types of representation? One of the tests contemporary societies set is: how well does it do in producing a legislature that is reflective of the population? Another measure is what proportion of traditionally unrepresented groups are elected? Women constitute about 50 per cent of the voters how well do they do? What about ethnic minorities or various other kinds of minority communities? There is actually very good data on how well women are doing in electoral politics. Canada now ranks 44th in the world, in terms of proportion of

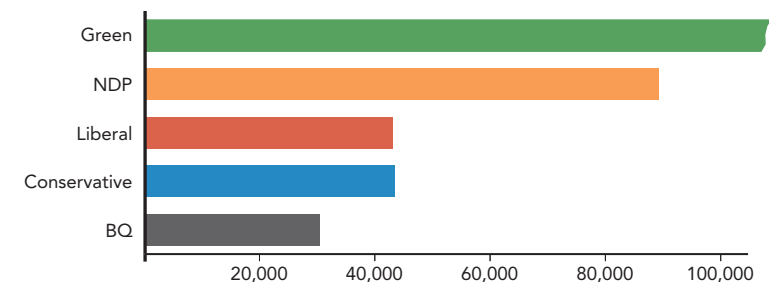
women in its national parliament, a position that is not improving and may actually be in decline.

Fig. 6 - Women in National Parliaments



Ours is also a system in which the cost of a seat in the House of Commons is really quite unequal. As a measure we can take the number of votes it “cost” a party to win a seat in the 2006 election we have just had. It cost the Bloc Québécois about 33,000 votes to win one seat. For the Liberals and Conservatives, it took around 43,000 votes. The New Democrats required over 90,000 to win a seat and, as for the Green Party, they couldn’t buy a seat. Put another way, if you had a half-a-million votes and you were the Bloc, you got 16 seats in the House of Commons. If you had half-a-million votes and you were the Liberals or the Conservatives, you got about 11 seats. If you had half-a-million votes and

Fig. 7 - Votes per House of Commons seat, 2006



you were the New Democrats, you got just five seats. And if you had a half-a-million votes and you were the Green Party, well, good luck and try again – you got nothing.

It is clear who does best under our current system (see Fig. 7). It turns out we have a system in which the Bloc is the party most over-represented in Parliament: a party that's not particularly known for its commitment to the long-term good working of the country's national government.

So, from a number of different perspectives, and with a number of pieces of evidence, we can see that there are real challenges, there are real questions that have been asked and continue to be asked about the way we do our electoral politics – the way we do our democracy.

But why do these patterns persist? What's at the root of these different phenomena that I've been talking about in the last few minutes? Well, it reflects the fact that we have an electoral system that is designed to represent places. Members in the House of Commons are referred to as the Member from Kingston and the Islands or the Member from Vancouver Centre, not Mr. Milliken or Ms. Fry. They are not called by their names – they are identified by the places that they represent. And so we have an electoral process in which the legislatures are organized around places, not around political parties, not around interests, not around voters. Elections are winner-take-all phenomena in which the losers are supposed to be represented by the winners.

It's a system in which there is no connection, as I illustrated a minute or two ago, between the share of votes a party has and its share of seats. And finally, of course, it's a system that spills over into the governing parts of the process because governments are chosen not by voters but by the legislatures produced by this process. So at the heart of this, these several anomalies, these kinds of questions that we are raising, lies our electoral system. An ancient electoral system of some centuries of use.

Well all this is old news. If you had taken Steve Wolinetz's comparative politics course, you would have heard a version of this some time earlier. So, if it's old news, why has it suddenly become an issue? I think there are

a number of reasons why it's coming on to the agenda. The first is that we are now in an era of electoral reform. It's been stimulated by the growth of a large number of new electoral democracies in eastern Europe. There are now as many democracies there as in western Europe. There has also been a wave of electoral reform in a good number of the established western democracies – New Zealand, Italy and Japan; and a wide range of other countries have turned to this question. So we're in a global era in which electoral reform has become part of the public agenda. Now I don't think that Canadian politicians sit around all day thinking about what's on the global political agenda, but these currents of thought and intellectual questioning are out there and we haven't been immune from them.

Secondly, it's on the agenda because we know that voter turnout is higher in most other kinds of systems. We know that electoral outcomes would be different under a different kind of electoral system. We know that the composition of our parliaments would look different under different kinds of electoral systems, and so if these are issues of concern, we know that they can be changed by engaging in electoral system change.

The issue has reached the national agenda in a rather haphazard and piecemeal way. I think it's fair to say that the Law Commission of Canada had some impact; it travelled the country and produced a substantial report advocating a fundamental change, and that gave reform some enhanced credibility. The previous Prime Minister, Mr. Martin, campaigned for the leadership of his party, and then the Prime Ministership, on the grounds there was a democratic deficit in this country. We've had Mr. Martin and then Mr. Harper campaigning on questions of accountability and responsibility, an elected Senate and a range of similar issues. The major party leaders have, in effect, accepted the proposition that something is broken.

Others may have different agendas than Mr. Martin, who seemed content to suggest that if we fix Parliament, change Question Period and Parliamentary committees, all will be well, and I think they have gone

some considerable way to helping to put the question on the agenda, and really raise questions of the electoral system's legitimacy. In its last session, Parliament had a committee thinking about doing electoral reform. Its members did not seem to be sure what they wanted to do, and so travelled the world to examine other systems, but in doing so they helped strengthen the perception that this is an issue whose time has come.

More importantly, perhaps, and this is something I want to talk a bit more about tonight, electoral reform has been on the active agenda in at least five provinces that have taken it up in a major, sustained and disciplined way: British Columbia, Ontario, Quebec, New Brunswick and Prince Edward Island. One of the things that's interesting about all these cases is, not only have they taken up the agenda, but four of them have moved so there is now a formal proposal on their respective provincial agendas. Two provinces have gone to referendum, and in another one there is an important legislative committee at work.

One of the things that is quite interesting is that in all those provinces, it is the Premier who is driving the process. Campbell, McGuinty, Charest, Binns and Lord are making it possible to take the issue seriously. And all of them are implicitly recognizing that there is something broken about the electoral system. Now, the last people we expect to want to change the rules of the game are the premiers – the individuals who have been the biggest winners under the current system. But even they have begun to accept that there's something fundamentally wrong and have recognized the part they can play in the wider democratic reform agenda.

When he became premier of British Columbia, one of the first things Mr. Campbell did was to set a fixed election date, taking away a major power that premiers have traditionally enjoyed. He televised some of his Cabinet meetings. He set loose a unique electoral reform process. For his part, Mr. Lord defined a broad, sweeping and very impressive agenda for his reform exercise in New Brunswick. Both these premiers are part of ambitious reform movements and they really seem to think something must be done. And yet these are the individuals we might have assumed would be least responsive to the calls for change.

So increasingly, the idea of doing democracy differently in this country is coming to centre on the notion that maybe we need to do electoral politics differently. It is about more than just changing the rules of the House of Commons, more than just changing the political financing rules. There is an increasing concern for doing electoral politics differently. And to do it differently, we're probably going to have to change the basic rules of the electoral game. It appears that there is now a wide-spread acceptance of that reality.

But it's also clear that people want to change the rules of the game for different kinds of reasons, and there are, in fact, a wide range of reasons and problems in the different political communities of the federation that have stimulated this new policy agenda. And different problems call upon different approaches to solving the problem, and different approaches have resulted in different solutions, and so we are currently trying to figure out what we're going to do about this.

We now have, in this country, a view that reform needs to be taken up and, perhaps surprisingly, it has been taken up simultaneously in a number of different jurisdictions. Very often in policy innovation, a province or the national government will make an innovation, other provinces will watch and, if it works, they'll copy it. But in this case different jurisdictions are doing it at the same time, not by learning what others are doing, but by trying to work it out for themselves.

The impulse in all the cases is to some kind of proportionality – Proportional Representation (or PR) in the lingo of political scientists. To put it simply, the idea is if you get 30 per cent of the votes, you should get about 30 per cent of the seats; if you get half the votes, you should get about half the seats. The numbers don't have to be exact, but the basic idea is that votes and seats ought to be roughly proportional to one another. That's a very different kind of principle from the one underlying the current system. PR is based on the idea that the fundamental unit of the election is not the person (candidate), nor the place (constituency), but the party. Fairness of outcomes is measured in terms of party shares.

But it's also quite clear that, in Canada, there is an interest in trying to find systems that include the old values, reflecting the imperative of local representation, the power of geography. Mackenzie King once suggested there was too much geography in this country, and geography has always trumped in our politics. Canadians seem willing to give that up, but they do want to find some way to combine those old principles with new ones. There's an increasing recognition, certainly among the public, if you listen to the polls and talk to Canadians, that the era of adversarial one-party government ought to be over. Unlike the politicians, most voters don't think that all truth lies with one party and all wickedness with their opponents. But that, of course, has been the fundamental operating principle of our parties and their legislatures. If you ask Canadians, they would say that politicians should co-operate and should form coalitions, and that this would be better than single-party majority governments. I'm not sure that this idea is widely shared by the political class, but there's no doubt that it's an important element underpinning the notion that we ought to move towards proportionality.

There is also a growing challenge to the view that changing the electoral system is the private business of politicians. Up until now, the electoral rules of the game have been changed by politicians to suit them. And we have a long history of politicians doing just that. In 1885, John A. MacDonald called his Franchise Act of that year "the greatest triumph of my life." Can you imagine, John A. MacDonald thinking an act to rig the franchise was the greatest triumph of his life? Well, he did because he thought it would keep the Conservatives in power forever. Well, it kept them in power at least until he died, but not a lot longer. However the notion that politicians have the right to fiddle the system is no longer acceptable.

Is it time to reform national politics? Well, there are a lot of people who would argue that it is, because we now have a fragmented national party system. Governments are no longer able to command wide-spread support, for the average government share of the votes has been under 40 per cent since the 1990s. And considering that not much more than

half the electorate is voting, it means that Canadian governments are being formed with something like 20-24 per cent of the voting public supporting them. Voter turnout is plunging despite the fact that we have more choices than ever: fewer people are prepared to come and cast a vote for any one of the choices on offer.

I think there is a lot of evidence to suggest that the elections of 2004 and 2006 may represent a new norm, and that we are going to see the party system fall into a pattern of on-going minority governments. We probably should have had a minority in 1993, 1997 and 2000 – the only reason we didn't is because the Liberals won virtually every single seat in Ontario and turned themselves into a party of Ontario. That's ultimately untenable as a formula for a national government. So, the prospects for majority governments seem dubious. But if there's not much prospect for majority government, why would we want an electoral system whose only virtue is that it is supposed to produce them? Thus it seems inevitable that national electoral reform is going to be on the agenda of many interested Canadians.

But despite talk of electoral fairness or proportionality, there's not much evidence yet that Canadian party politicians are likely to move in this direction. They are, and they continue to be, preoccupied with the politics of regionalism. How do they prevent the fragmentation of national parties and national politics? How can they try to ensure that governing parties represent all the regions? (And they recognize that throughout the 1990s, whatever the façade, that wasn't the case.) How to ensure that regional parties are not favoured? How can we not favour the Bloc, yet still have single-party majority governments? Given that these are the questions they keep asking, and given that there is no solution in sight for them, nothing much is being done in Ottawa. There is talk about maybe doing something sometime, but no real evidence politicians are willing to seriously tackle a reform agenda.

The action is all in the provinces, and the provinces are really all very different. Reform is bubbling up in the different provinces of our federation, and for different reasons. And the problems and the issues of

the provinces go a long way to helping us understand what is going on. In Quebec, the problem is what they call a “linguistic gerrymander.” The reality is, for the Liberals to win an election in Quebec, they need five to seven per cent more of the votes than their Parti Quebecois opponents. That reality goes back for some decades, leaving the system permanently discriminating against one of the two parties. Quebecers recognize that this is their fundamental problem to be fixed.

In Prince Edward Island and New Brunswick, the main problem is small legislatures with unacceptably weak oppositions. In recent years there hasn’t been an effective opposition for substantial periods. That means, of course, that when the opposition ultimately does get elected, it’s full of amateurs and rookie politicians who are not well prepared to become effective governors. In New Brunswick this problem is compounded by deep-seated problems of ethnic accommodation. In Ontario and British Columbia I think that the problem is simply defined as increasing public discontent with the system and a growing citizen alienation from electoral politics. So the provinces have different kinds of problems which are at the root of their different reform agendas.

That said, all those provinces, and all these reform exercises that flow out of their challenges, are moving in roughly the same direction. And that is the direction of proportional representation. In some sense, this reflects the intellectual currents of the era that we live in, and the conceptions of what seems right, and reasonable, and fair in an electoral system. In Quebec, it’s a question of party fairness: the only way to get fairness, to get rid of the permanent imbalance, is to adopt proportionality. In the Maritimes, more proportional legislatures are seen as the only route to ensuring the opposition has a reasonable presence. In British Columbia and Ontario, the recognition of considerable system failure has led to the search for significant change. (British Columbia, of course, had a case of a wrong winner, followed immediately by an eviscerated opposition, and it was widely agreed that the discourse of the province’s political system was just not very healthy.) All these provincial incentives imply adopting the same PR principle. The big

question for all is how to implement the principle of proportionality, how to build a system based on that principle, and how to make it work.

In watching this develop, there are two things worth noting, for they mark important new wrinkles in our politics. One of the great lessons of the Charlottetown episode of the early 1990s was that the Constitution is too big for the politicians – the guys in suits working in backrooms – and so, somehow the people have to take responsibility for it. Electoral reform, because it deals with fundamental constitution-like principles, has now come to be seen as belonging to the people. And so this has meant that electoral reform has become one of those issues for which a referendum is now seen as necessary to legitimate change. The premiers in Ontario, British Columbia, New Brunswick and Prince Edward Island have all said, “we can’t have electoral reform without a referendum.” We have already had one in British Columbia, and the government says we’re going to have another. Prince Edward Island had one a month or two ago, and the Ontario and New Brunswick Premiers have both promised there will be referenda before there is electoral change in their provinces.

Quebec is having more trouble with this for the Liberals in that province are not keen on that word “referendum.” So they’ve created a legislative committee to which has been added a number of ordinary citizens. They hope this committee can provide a forum for enhanced citizen participation and engagement.

The other thing we want to remember is that no two places use the same electoral system. There are no two countries in the democratic world that use exactly the same way of electing their parliaments. (I sometimes tell my students there are as many different electoral systems as there are mathematicians with an idle hour to invent another. At the BC Citizens’ Assembly we actually got quite a lot of them by e-mail.)

And there is no perfect system. There is no perfect system because every political community has its own needs, its own internal dynamics, and the electoral system is simply an institutional device for finding a way to choose representatives for community decision-making. And so, the kind of device you need reflects the kind of representatives you want



and the kind of representational issues that affect a political community. Different electoral problems are likely to lead to different solutions, even if they come within the ambit of a common underlying principle, like proportionality.

If you have different agendas, different problems, you may be right to think that you need to deal with them in different ways: one kind of problem needs one kind of process to sort it out, another requires a different approach. And what we actually see in this country, in the various provinces' policy exercises, is that with different problems have come very different kinds of mechanisms for dealing with them. In Quebec, the problem is defined in technical terms: how can the permanent favouritism shown to one side of the political system be righted? That is a perfect problem for political scientists – they can be hired to devise what might be described as an essentially technical solution. Not surprisingly, that's the approach that has been adopted in Quebec.

In Prince Edward Island and New Brunswick, the challenge was to ensure a viable opposition presence in the legislature. They knew the solution was some sort of proportionality, so the problem was to identify the right proportional system for the province. The task was given to a traditional Canadian-style commission (of the reasonable and the representative) appointed by the premier and answering to the government.

In British Columbia and Ontario, the ambition was to engage alienated citizens, to try and bring them into the political process by giving them some control over their political system. And so what's happened is that Citizens' Assemblies were invented to determine the kind of institutions the general population wanted.

Different agendas produced different processes and those processes almost inevitably led to different solutions being proposed. This is where we get to the political science-y part of my talk for the political science buffs in the audience.

Here is a simplified chart summarizing the different existing provincial proposals:

**Table 2**

	<b>Proposed New Electoral System</b>	<b>Likely Impact on Province's Politics</b>
<b>QC</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Small-region mixed-member PR</li> <li>• Electors have one vote</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Stabilize existing party system</li> <li>• Increase safe seats</li> </ul>
<b>PEI</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Province-wide mixed-member PR</li> <li>• Electors have two votes</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Increase party leader control over party and caucus</li> <li>• Make it harder to defeat senior politicians</li> </ul>
<b>NB</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Big-region mixed-member PR</li> <li>• Electors have two votes</li> <li>• Politicians limited to one part of system</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Increase regionalization of party organization</li> <li>• Force politicians to chose electoral focus</li> <li>• Aggravate intra-party dynamics</li> </ul>
<b>BC</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Transferable vote (preferential ballot) PR</li> <li>• Multi-member constituencies</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Increase voters' choices</li> <li>• Eliminate all safe seats in legislature</li> <li>• Socialize intra-party competition</li> </ul>

Quebec proposes a system of many very small regions, with voters all having one vote for a party candidate in their local district, with those votes then aggregated to elect a number of candidates from the regional lists. Prince Edward Island's plan is for a province-wide system of proportionality, with electors having two votes, one for a party and one for a local candidate. In New Brunswick there is to be large-region proportionality to help structure and balance the impulses and concerns of the province's two linguistic communities; electors will have two votes (as in PEI) but the politicians won't be allowed to contest both the party list and local electoral district parts of the system. They will have to choose, something almost no other mixed-member system requires. And in British Columbia, the Citizens' Assembly has called for a system based on electoral districts that return several members with voters casting ballots on which they rank the candidates (1, 2, 3 etc.) in the order they prefer.

So we have four proposals for change – all advocating fundamentally different electoral systems – that have come out of distinctive processes rooted in the different interests and demands of those provinces. These



different policy proposals have the capacity to produce big changes in the respective political systems if they are adopted. However, all would have the intended consequences of producing proportional outcomes. That principle is not in doubt, it is enshrined in all of them.

And it's quite clear that all the evidence of political science – library shelves of it – will tell you that under those kinds of systems, majority governments will become the exception, coalition politics will develop over time, and politicians will have to learn new ways of engaging with one another and of governing. Those are all significant changes that would alter the way government is done in this country. That said, those different proposals would have very different consequences. In Quebec the prospect is for reinforcing an existing party system and increasing the number of safe seats in the National Assembly. It is a politician's dream: it stabilizes the party system and works to protect incumbents.

In Prince Edward Island, the form of PR suggested could considerably increase the party leader's control over the party and who gets elected in the party, and it would make it a lot harder to defeat senior politicians; it would be almost impossible to unseat the people at the top of the two main parties. In New Brunswick, the Commission's proposed change to the electoral system might increase the regionalization of the parties and force the politicians to become either local advocates or issue-based, regional politicians. They would exist in different kinds of electoral worlds, and the legislature would have two kind members. Some politicians would be in a situation in which they would need their fellow partisans (their nominal running-mates) to lose in order to get elected.

British Columbia proposes a system which would increase significantly the amount of choice the voters got, would eliminate every single safe seat in the Provincial Assembly (that was a great appeal to many in the Citizens' Assembly), and would stimulate a good deal of internal party competition, bringing it into the electoral arena where voters would get to make key decisions now confined to private party meetings.

Proportional representation yes, but different problems producing very different proposals. And these different proposals could have

enormously different kinds of consequences on the shape and character of party politics in the individual provinces.

One wonders if there's a policy-making lesson here. Can we see a pattern in this story? One might simply say that if you start with a fairly narrowly defined agenda, and turn over the problem to "insiders" – bureaucrats and political consultants – you're probably going to get a fairly conservative, safe reform – safe for the existing system and its participants. You're not going to upset too many boats. If you have a middling agenda, and appoint a representative commission (which tends to be populated by political insiders), you may well get reforms that imply significant changes to an existing system. But if you start with fairly broad sweeping goals about doing democracy better or differently, and engage citizens by giving power to complete outsiders, as Citizens' Assemblies do (one basic criterion for membership in the BC Citizens' Assembly was you could not be a politician), you're likely to get people who propose rather more sweeping changes to the system and its fundamentals.

Does one or other of these routes provide a better path to democratic reform? Is Quebec's narrow agenda, insider-crafted, conservative proposal, or British Columbia's wide agenda, outsider-built, big-change plan more likely to lead to electoral reform? It's not at all clear that one or the other is a better approach. In fact, each reflects the realities of the political needs, imperatives, and dynamics of the political communities of those provinces and the problems they see to doing democracy differently. Each of them responds to the realities of the province's political life. It may be that both of them will come into effect, or that neither of them will. There is no obvious or best way to pursue reform.

As we speak, we can say something about the current state of play. If there is an increasingly widespread recognition, even among the political classes, that current electoral processes are flawed, that they don't work, it's also equally clear that there's no agreement on a single alternative, any best practices, or even any agreement on appropriate processes or mechanisms. The provinces, unlike Ottawa, have moved to consider

unique systems to meet their distinctive political realities. Quebec's citizen-augmented legislative committee is now holding public hearings. Prince Edward Island had its referendum last November; however, once into the process the government got cold feet, changed the terms for the proposal's acceptance, and only opened a quarter of the normal polling places. A low turnout ensued and the proposal was defeated.

In New Brunswick, we're waiting for Mr. Lord to act. The premier is a cautious politician and he's thinking carefully about these things. The final report of the Commission on Legislative Democracy recommended major reforms in a wide range of areas. New Brunswick has a history of being prepared to lead – it did it in the Robichaud years (on governance issues), the Hatfield years (on linguistic accommodation issues) and the McKenna years (on economic policy issues). The question is whether Mr. Lord will follow in that tradition on democratic reform. He now has that agenda in front of him<sup>1</sup>.

British Columbia had a referendum on the proposal produced by the Citizens' Assembly. The Assembly members wrote the referendum question which went directly to the people, and about 58 per cent voted for it. However, before the Assembly was set up, the legislature had decided that 60 per cent support would be required for it to pass, so it failed by just two per cent. In the aftermath of the election the premier recognized a big appetite for electoral reform in the province and indicated that the question would again be put to the people in a referendum. The next time, there is to be some money provided for a YES campaign and a NO campaign along with a map showing what the new system would look like.

This summary of the movement towards major change is really quite striking, for if one had inquired only three years ago about the possibility of electoral reform in Canada, the question would have hardly been taken seriously. The fact that there is real momentum around the country is both remarkable and unprecedented.

<sup>1</sup> Since this lecture was delivered Premier Lord has announced a referendum on electoral reform and, unlike any other premier to date, has indicated he intends to personally support it.

As a policy area, electoral reform is particularly difficult. It seems that as we proceed down this road – these several roads we may be going down – we are likely to be led to a situation in which Canadians in different provinces will be voting under quite different electoral systems. And the consequences will be that their party systems will come to look very different.

Voters will be able to handle that variety. Those living in parts of the United Kingdom now vote under four different kinds of systems depending on whether they're voting for a Local Council, the Scottish or Welsh Assemblies, the European Parliament or the House of Commons. All use quite different kinds of systems, but voters don't have much trouble with them. Canadians may well move to a system in which the systems at the provincial and federal levels will be different, and will vary from one province to the next (as they have in the past). That would likely amplify the discontinuities between provincial and federal political organizations, and increase the fragmentation of political parties in this country.

If we do produce new electoral processes, who's to say they won't produce different legislatures that look quite different in terms of their partisan composition, their social composition, their internal dynamics and their governance process? And if we develop a system in which there is a range of different kinds of governing mechanisms, it's bound to spill over into our system of executive federalism. The current system would not easily survive, so electoral reform has the capacity to change the character of federalism as we practice it in this country.

It's quite clear that there's no one way to do electoral democracy in Canada. The various proposals for reform all argue that there are better ways for their provinces and there seems no reason to be particularly concerned if the provinces adopt distinctive systems. Indeed, one of the principal reasons we remain a federation is precisely to allow distinctive provincial communities to practice politics in a way that responds to their unique needs.

It's also increasingly clear that there are new opportunities for real

citizen engagement. The best example is from British Columbia, where 160 citizens gathered in a Citizens' Assembly on Electoral Reform to consider what kind of system their province needed. That remarkable exercise, quite unprecedented in the history of democracies, was so successful that it is being copied in the Netherlands and in the province of Ontario. And legislators in California have proposed a Bill to set up a constitutional citizens' assembly to deal with some of the roadblocks in their system. The assembly model has become an important new tool for popular institutional reform.

The experience of the British Columbia Assembly offers some lessons and I want to finish by pointing to two or three of them. First, it's quite clear that citizens do want to be engaged in defining their political institutions. There's every evidence that they are willing to work at it in a sustained and a disciplined way. Second, it's also clear that ordinary citizens can deal with these kinds of issues. Political scientists used to think that only highly-trained experts could grapple with the details of these institutional problems. It's not true. I may get drummed out of the profession for saying this, but the Citizens' Assembly demonstrated that ordinary citizens can take these issues on, can think about the principles that ought to underpin their society, and then determine the kinds of institutions to help them get there. And third, it's also clear that citizens can reach value-based agreements in a deliberate and consensual way. The final vote of the Citizens' Assembly, on whether to keep the existing electoral system or change to a new one, was ultimately decided by 146 votes to seven. It was the result, not of two sides battling it out, but of long discussion and deliberation that sought to build a consensus on shared values and principles.

We also learned from the BC experience that citizens are likely to think about these issues differently than politicians do. Members of the BC Citizens' Assembly were concerned with how much choice voters have, and how that choice is articulated. They were also keenly interested in how local representation really works. In other words, they were interested in issues which are not often the principal preoccupations of

party politicians. This is because they defined electoral politics from their perspective as voters – not as representatives or governors. Many people predicted that the BC Citizens' Assembly would recommend some change, but nobody in the world that I know of (including the director of Research) predicted the recommendation they did come up with. They did so because they came at the issue of electoral reform as committed citizens seeking a greater opportunity to make the system responsive to their concerns.

So are we moving towards a renewed democracy, are we going to learn to do democracy differently? We know now that there is no single guaranteed fix. There is no easy way to solve the problems which illustrate the deficiencies of our current system. Electoral system change will not send voter turnouts skyrocketing. It might be a bit better than under our current system, but changing the rules is not likely to reverse the dramatically sharp decline – a decline that's been farther and deeper in Canada than almost any other decline in western democracy. Electoral system change is not going to convert political adversaries into allies suddenly enthused with consensus-building coalition politics. It's not going to eliminate voter cynicism or the deep levels of alienation now marking the political culture.

But it may well be a necessary first step for a system that is increasingly broken. It seems to me that we are in a moment of openness to change that is long overdue. And recognizing that we don't all have to do electoral politics in the same way across the country may be our best hope for learning to do democracy differently.

Thank you very much.

With nearly 18,000 students and 2,500 permanent faculty and staff, from more than 90 countries and diverse cultures, Memorial University of Newfoundland is the largest university in Atlantic Canada. We provide excellent undergraduate, professional and graduate programs in virtually all disciplines from our campuses in St. John's and Corner Brook in Newfoundland and Labrador, and in Harlow, England. Outstanding research and scholarship, extraordinary teaching and a focus on community service are our hallmarks. Take a closer look at Memorial, visit [www.mun.ca](http://www.mun.ca).

