Doing Democracy Differently: Is it time for electoral reform in Canada?

John Kenneth Galbraith Lecture in Public Policy
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Questions to ask

- Why talk about this?
  *Is this really an important policy question*

- Why now?
  *How did it get on the agenda*

- How do we do it?
  *Who gets to change the rules of the game*

- What should we do?
  *Does everyone have a different scheme*

- What prospects for real change?
  *Is anything going to come of this*
A democratic deficit

- Growing popular cynicism and distrust
- Declining trust in political parties
- Shrinking political party memberships
- Declining voter turnout

*Is there something to be done?*
**Pop Quiz**

**Q:** What do these guys have in common?

**Clue:** 1896 1925 1957 1979

**A:** All became Prime Minister in an election where the “other fellow” got more votes!
And more recent ‘wrong winners’

- Clyde Wells  LIB  Newfoundland & Labrador
- Gerry Regan  LIB  Nova Scotia
- Richard Hatfield  PC  New Brunswick
- Daniel Johnson  LIB  Quebec
- Lucien Bouchard  PQ
- David Peterson  LIB  Ontario
- Grant Devine  PC  Saskatchewan
- Roy Romanow  NDP
- Glen Clark  NDP  British Columbia
Election outcome realities

- No match between vote shares and seat share
- Government always gets a “bonus”
- No predictability or regular pattern in successive elections
What sort of governments?

- No guarantee of majority government
- Most majorities are “artificial”

Governments dominate provincial legislatures (¼ have > 80% seats)
Unrepresentative parliaments...unequal votes

Women in National Parliaments

Women in parliament: Canada ranks 44th

Party votes don't count equally:
- **Bloc** treated best
- **Greens** shut out
Why these ‘problems’?

Recall that . . .

- Elections designed to represent places, *not* parties, interests or even voters in the legislature
- Elections are “winner-take-all” in which losers are represented by their opponents
- No connection between a party’s votes and its seats
- Governments are chosen by legislatures (not voters)

Perhaps it is our ancient election system
But this is all *old news*. Why is it issue now?

- Electoral reform is in the air
  eastern Europe & established democracies

- Voter turnout, election outcomes & parliamentary composition
  all vary under different electoral systems

- **Nationally**
  Law Commission advocates change
  Prime Ministers talk reform
  Parliament considers how it might alter the system

- 5 *provinces* actively take up an electoral reform agenda:
  
  \[
  \text{BC} \quad \text{ONT} \quad \text{QUE} \quad \text{NB} \quad \text{PEI}
  \]

  In all cases a *Premier* driving the process in response to recognizable systemic failures!
Doing democracy differently

- Is defined as doing electoral politics differently
- Changing electoral politics requires changing electoral rules
- But not always for the same reasons
  - the nation and provinces see different problems
- Different societies : Different problems
  * call up different approaches
  * produce different solutions
Trying to do democracy differently

- Reform process taking place simultaneously

- Impulse to *proportionality* “PR”, representing parties, not places

- Interest in systems that combine the old with the new

- Is the era of adversarial single-party government over?

- Challenge belief that electoral reform is politicians’ business
Time to reform national politics?

- Fragmented party system
- Governments no longer have wide public support
- Turnout plunging despite more choices

- 2004 & 2006 elections represent the new norm
- Prospects for majority government now questionable
- Why not a system that represents voters’ choices
Despite talk of electoral fairness & proportionality...

Canada’s party politicians are still preoccupied with the problem of regionalism

- How to prevent regional fragmentation of national politics & parties
- How to ensure governing parties represent all the regions
- How to ensure regional parties are not favoured while still having single-party majority governments

With no ‘solution’ in sight nothing is being done
The provinces are different

They see their problems in distinctive terms
- different from Canada’s, and from each others:

- **QUE**
  - the ‘linguistic gerrymander’

- **PEI**
  - weak opposition & ineffective legislature

- **NB**
  - weak oppositions, rural governance & ethno-linguistic accommodation

- **ONT & BC**
  - political discontent and citizen alienation
Moving towards the same (PR) solution

Moving with global winds of change . . .

**Quebec**
defines the issue in terms of party fairness

**Maritimers**
simply call directly for more proportional legislatures

**BC & Ontario**
admit system failures and seek significant change

*All imply adopting a new electoral principle*
Two wrinkles to note

1. Electoral reform touches fundamental constitutional principles . . .
Elections belong to the public, not the politicians

➡️ Referendum politics
BC  May 2005 & again in 2008;  PEI  Nov 2005;  NB & ONT promised

2. No 2 countries use the same electoral system:
There is no ‘perfect’ system
Different electoral ‘problems’ lead to different solutions
Different agenda . . .
Different processes

- **QUE**
  Fix the partisan distortions without disrupting province’s political life
  Assign *Technical Experts* to devise a solution

- **PEI & NB**
  Ensure a viable opposition presence in the legislature
  Appoint *Representative Commissions* to design reform

- **BC & ONT**
  Engage citizens in democratizing their political system
  Create *Citizen Assemblies* to invent preferred institutions
Different Processes . . .
Different Policy Proposals

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>QUE</th>
<th>small region PR, electors have 1 local vote</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>PEI</td>
<td>province-wide PR, electors have 2 votes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NB</td>
<td>big region PR, electors have 2 votes, politicians limited</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BC</td>
<td>multi-Member district PR, voters list preferences</td>
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</table>
Different Policies . . .
Different Consequences

All would have *intended* consequence of producing proportional results:
- Majority governments might be the exception
- Coalition politics would develop

<table>
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<th>Stabilize existing party system. Increase safe seats.</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>QUE</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PEI</td>
<td>Increase party leaders control over who gets elected. Make it harder to defeat senior politicians</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NB</td>
<td>Increase regionalization of parties. Force politicians to choose focus.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BC</td>
<td>Increase voters’ choices. Eliminate all safe seats. Stimulate internal party competition</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Is there a story here?

- **Narrow, tightly defined agenda**
  - political & bureaucratic insiders
  - comparatively ‘safe’ reform

- **Middling agenda**
  - a representative commission
  - significant changes to existing system

- **Broad general goals**
  - give power to ‘outsiders’
  - sweeping reform to system fundamentals
Long roads to change

Quebec’s narrow agenda - insider crafted - conservative proposal

vs.

BC’s wide agenda - outsider built - big change plan

No reason to think one is:
- better than the other
- more likely to lead to electoral reform

Each responds to the realities of their individual provincial political problems and possibilities
As we speak . . .

- Recognition current electoral processes are flawed
- No agreement on a single alternative
- The provinces have moved to consider unique systems to meet their distinctive political realities
- Que holding public hearings
  PEI a failed referendum
  NB waiting for a Premier to act
  BC 58% & going for more

Ottawa talking vaguely about maybe doing something
Democracies in the federation

- Reform process may leave Canadians in different places using very different electoral systems
- This will increase the disconnect between political parties
  - from province to province
  - between federal & provincial politics in a province
- New electoral processes will
  → new legislatures
  → new patterns of governing
- No one way to do democracy
- Citizens’ engagement opens possibilities...
Lessons from BC’s Citizens’ Assembly

- Citizens want to be involved in defining their political institutions
- ‘Ordinary’ citizens can figure out complex systems
- They can deliberate and reach value-based agreements on the most appropriate system for their community
- Citizens will define democratic problems, and solutions, differently than established elites
Towards a renewed democracy?

- There is no guaranteed fix
- Electoral system change won’t:
  - send voter turnout skyrocketing
  - convert political adversaries into buddies
  - eliminate voter cynicism
- A necessary first step for a broken system
- **Openness** to overdue change & recognition we don’t all have to be the same our best hope for doing democracy differently