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# *The End of the First-Past-the Post Electoral System?*

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by Jean-François Caron

*All federal, provincial and territorial elections in Canada use the first-past-the-post electoral system. However, this system is coming under increased criticism due to the disparity between popular votes and seats won in the Assembly. This article makes the case for electoral reform.*

It is no secret to anyone that an increasingly dim view is being taken of politicians within our parliamentary institutions. A 1995 poll indicated that only 4% of the population trusted them.<sup>1</sup> The same is true in other western democracies. The unpopular image of our elected representatives prompted the philosopher Charles Taylor to say that in all western countries, there is a new orthodoxy that regards all politicians as corrupt.<sup>2</sup>

Canadians and Quebecers are looking for a new understanding with the political class, a new social contract, one that would be based much more on consultation and easier access to discussion.

One such solution, currently being examined in Great Britain, is reform of our "first-past-the-post" electoral system to produce one that would combine proportional representation with the existing voting system.

## **Inequalities inherent in the first-past-the-post system**

The first-past-the-post system presents a number of advantages for the electorate. It is familiar to the general public, and provides an easy and speedy way both to vote and to count the results. In addition, it generally guarantees stability in government by giving one party a comfortable majority in Parliament.

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Nonetheless, the first-past-the-post method produces serious distortions that a mixed voting method might remedy.

It should therefore come as no surprise to find that the first past the post system is in use in only four countries: Canada, the United States, India and Great Britain. When Tony Blair came to power in Great Britain in 1997, he initiated an in-depth reform of its democratic institutions, establishing an independent commission chaired by Lord Jenkins of Hillhead.

The results of that commission came as a cold shower for supporters of the existing system, by exposing its weaknesses – the exact same weaknesses we find in Canada.

In fact, the first-past-the-post voting method has an annoying tendency to over-account for trends in public opinion, and may result in large majorities in Parliament, as was the case in Quebec last November when the Parti Québécois got 26 more seats than the Liberals although the Liberals had obtained more votes. This is something that happens relatively frequently – three times in Quebec in the space of 50 years, in 1944, 1966 and 1998. It also happened twice in the federal Parliament, in 1957 and 1962.

It is interesting to note that between 1921 and 1974, only 2 out of 17 federal elections resulted in one party obtaining an absolute majority of the vote. In 1997, the Liberal Party retained a majority in the House, although 60% of Canadians expressed a preference for another party.

These serious inequalities do nothing to encourage public trust in the political class. As André Bernard said

**Discrepancy Between Proportion of Seats and Proportion of Popular Vote  
Obtained by Parties in Quebec Provincial Elections (1956-1998)**

Election	Party	% of pop. vote	% of seats	Discrepancy
1956	Liberal Party	44.5	21.5	-23.0
	Union Nationale	52.0	77.4	25.4
1960	Liberal Party	51.3	53.7	2.4
	Union Nationale	46.6	45.2	-1.4
1962	Liberal Party	56.9	69.1	7.7
	Union Nationale	42.1	32.6	-9.5
1966	Liberal Party	47.2	46.3	-0.9
	Union Nationale	40.9	51.9	11.0
	Rassemblement pour l'indépendance Nationale	5.6	-	-5.6
	Ralliement National	3.2	-	-3.2
1970	Liberal Party	45.5	67.0	21.5
	Union Nationale	20.0	16.0	-4.0
	Parti Québécois	23.5	6.0	-17.5
	Parti Créditiste	11.0	11.0	-
1973	Liberal Party	54.6	92.7	38.1
	Union Nationale	5.0	-	-5.0
	Parti Québécois	30.3	5.5	-24.8
	Parti Créditiste	9.9	1.8	-8.1
1976	Liberal Party	33.7	23.7	-10.0
	Union Nationale	18.2	10.0	-8.2
	Parti Québécois	41.3	65.4	24.1
	Parti Créditiste	4.6	0.9	-3.7
	Parti Nationale Populaire	2.0	0.9	-1.1
1981	Liberal Party	46.1	34.4	-11.6
	Parti Québécois	49.3	65.6	16.3
	Union Nationale	4.0	-	-4.0
1985	Liberal Party	55.9	81.2	25.3
	Parti Québécois	38.9	18.9	-20.0
1989	Liberal Party	49.9	73.6	23.7
	Parti Québécois	40.2	23.2	-17.0
	Equal Party	3.7	3.2	-0.5
1994	Liberal Party	44.4	37.6	-6.8
	Parti Québécois	44.6	61.6	17.0
	Democratic Action Party	6.5	0.8	-5.7
1998	Liberal Party	43.5	38.4	-5.1
	Parti Québécois	42.8	60.8	18.0
	Democratic Action Party	11.8	0.8	-11.0

Source: André Bernard, *La politique au Canada et au Québec*, Sillery, PUQ, 1982, p. 173 and Director General of Elections, Quebec, <http://www.dgeq.qc.ca..>

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in his book *La politique au Canada et au Québec*, inequalities in the representation of the different political parties, particularly in a multi-party system, are regarded by some commentators as factors leading to a loss of interest in politics, and even to disaffection.<sup>3</sup>

The British commission chaired by Lord Jenkins, clearly established that electoral tidal waves impede the proper functioning of Parliament, in that the party in power is legitimately able to govern in the same way as a dictatorship. This happened in Quebec in 1973 when the Liberal Party won 102 of 110 seats with only a little over 50% of the popular vote. Some political economists have characterized these very large majorities as democratic dictatorships, and the public takes a very dim view of them.

Moreover, the first-past-the-post system leaves little room for third parties. This explains why there has been no minority government in Quebec since Confederation, and why there have been very few on the federal scene. Unlike other countries such as Italy or France, we have no tradition of cohabitation or minority government.

Nonetheless, it must be said that the role assigned to third parties in our parliamentary institutions does not genuinely reflect the popular will, as in many cases they end up with a lower percentage of seats than of votes. That was the case in 1973, when the Parti Québécois got 30% of the popular vote, but in only 5.5% of the seats in the National Assembly. More recently, the Action démocratique du Québec, got 11.8% of the vote in 1998, but their support resulted in fewer than 1% of the seats in the legislature.

***Large disparities can be attributed to the first-past-the-post system, which is an ineffective method of properly translating popular will into a number of representatives.***

In addition, the first-past-the-post voting method does not give voters freedom of choice in terms of choosing a representative and the party that will form the government. In fact, it forces voters to place their priority on one or the other, and plainly a very large majority of the population gives greater priority to who will be Prime Minister than to the person whose job it will be to represent them in Parliament.

The last point is that one of the main weaknesses of the first-past-the-post system lies in the fact that quite a few members are elected even though they failed to receive the support of a majority of their constituency. In Great Britain, for example, the proportion of M.P.s in this situa-

tion was 13.5% during the 1950s, but has climbed to 44% in the 1990s.

This is a significant flaw in a system that talks about the value and importance of MPs when nearly half of them come from constituencies where a majority voted against them. This paradox leads to growing public doubt regarding the majority rule principle in our federal electoral system.

### **A Mixed System**

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It therefore seems plain, after all these observations, that the first-past-the-post system is an archaic feature of our democracy. The simplest solution would be to change the system, to adopt a mixed voting system such as is found in Germany, where 50% of members are elected by our current method and the other half are elected on the proportional representation principle.

There are a number of advantages to this kind of change. One is that a mixed system would preserve the connection between members and their constituencies, which is something that proportional representation in its pure form fails to do. This connection is something that we are accustomed to in Canada, a feature that is fundamental to the British parliamentary tradition.

In addition, the very essence of that type of system lies in the fact that voters would have the chance to vote twice: once for their member, and a second time for an additional representative who would be elected as a way of remedying the imbalances left when the other members were elected. This would provide our democracy with the advantages associated with both a first-past-the-post system and proportional representation. Most importantly, we must not forget that voters would have an opportunity to express their real opinion in terms of both their choice of their own member and their choice of the party they wanted to see in power.

A lot of people are afraid of seeing a mixed system, largely because of the stability problems associated with proportional representation. Those individuals cite extreme cases such as Italy and Israel as examples.

Still, it is essential to point out that no democratic system, whether first-past-the-post or mixed, can guarantee government stability. That depends primarily on the ability of elected representatives to govern properly and responsibly. Moreover, as the Jenkins Commission report indicated the public takes a better view of a minority government than of one elected by a tidal wave.

Minority governments are therefore not as horrific as some might suggest, in that a policy of bipartite cooperation born out of compromise is much more likely to meet the aspirations of the public than is a policy of arrogance on the part of a minority government.

### Inequalities in the Representation of Political Parties on the Federal Scene

1921, with 41% of the vote, Liberals got 48% of the seats  
1925, with 40% of the vote, Liberals got 40% of the seats  
1926, with 46% of the vote, Liberals got 52% of the seats  
1930, with 49% of the vote, Conservatives got 56% of the seats  
1935, with 47% of the vote, Liberals got 73% of the seats  
1940, with 54% of the vote, Liberals got 75% of the seats  
1945, with 39% of the vote, Liberals got 49% of the seats  
1949, with 49% of the vote, Liberals got 73% of the seats  
1953, with 49% of the vote, Liberals got 65% of the seats  
1957, with 39% of the vote, Conservatives got 42% of the seats  
1958, with 53% of the vote, Conservatives got 79% of the seats  
1962, with 37% of the vote, Conservatives got 44% of the seats  
1963, with 42% of the vote, the Liberals got 48% of the seats  
1965, with 40% of the vote, the Liberals got 48% of the seats  
1968, with 45% of the vote, the Liberals got 58% of the seats  
1972, with 49% of the vote, the Liberals got 41% of the seats  
1974, with 43% of the vote, the Liberals got 53% of the seats

Source: André Bernard, *La politique au Canada et au Québec*, Sillery, PUQ, 1982, p. 172.

### Is a Mixed System Possible in Quebec?

In view of these observations, we may ask ourselves whether it is possible to institute a mixed system in Quebec. At first glance, this kind of measure could be implemented fairly easily. In fact, all that would be needed would be to reduce the number of constituencies to 75, that is, use the same geographic boundaries as are used for Quebec ridings in the House of Commons.

To fill the rest of the seats in the National Assembly, the parties would have to draw up a list of 50 people, who would be elected on the basis of the percentage of votes the party obtained. The immediate result is that third parties could at least hope to elect more than one or two

members, since their representation would no longer be determined solely on the basis of constituencies won.

Discrepancies between percentage of the vote and percentage of seats would thereby be reduced considerably, given that proportional representation would remedy the inequalities caused by the first-past-the-post system. In addition, voters would still have a representative in Parliament whose job it would be to respond to their needs and demands, all without increasing the costs inherent in the parliamentary system.

### Conclusion

We will have to wait until some party is brave enough to change the electoral system that gave it the advantage in the preceding election. For example, the Parti Québécois ardently called for change after the results of the 1973 election, when the discrepancy between their percentage of the popular vote and the seats they obtained was -25%. Unfortunately, those good intentions often melt away like snow on a sunny day once the party comes to power.

Still, the job will have to be started sooner or later, just as it is being done in Great Britain, which has not hesitated to question the foundations of its system, one that dates back several hundred years. Quebec and Canada cannot remain on the sidelines of this movement: the goal of any democracy is to try to reduce the distance between citizens and their governments, a distance that has now reached greater proportions than ever before.

### Notes

1. Working paper from the Bloc Québécois workshop on citizenship and democracy, p. 5.
2. *Ibid.*
3. André Bernard, *La politique au Canada et au Québec*, Sillery, PUQ, 1982, p. 173.