

PROPORTIONAL REPRESENTATION (PR) IS NEEDED NOW

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Parliament Hill National Day of Action by Fair Vote Canada

Ottawa

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Chers amis/cheres amies de Fair Vote Canada,

As a former Liberal, Conservative and Independent MP, I stress that PR is not a partisan issue. The recent killing of the much-needed reform by the prime minister, however, appears to be motivated solely by partisan concerns about the 2019 election.



Fair vote rally on Parliament Hill Feb 11, 2017

Protests similar to this one are evidently occurring today in 29 communities across our country. They were arranged on short notice by a broad coalition of young persons--dismayed by Justin Trudeau's sudden abandonment of PR and fired up about improving representative democracy in our Parliament.

No-one has put what appears to have immobilized our prime minister more accurately than Green Party leader Elizabeth May:

"The life of democracies around the world is being torn asunder as if by two wolves. One thrives on fear, division, raw prejudice, and cynicism. The other is pure. It needs hope, faith, mutual trust and cooperation...Our

young prime minister came to us wearing the mantle of the good wolf. He inspired hope. He imbued caring and compassion, generosity and sharing. He told young people... 'I am here to bring real change'."

"The promise to make every vote count, to ensure that 2015 would be the last election held under First Past the Post, was clear. It was not open to interpretation. Claiming... that they had "always" said no change would be made until they knew what the majority of Canadians wanted - is raw meat to the bad wolves".

FAIR VOTE CANADA

Réal Lavergne, president of Fair Vote Canada, who just spoke, offered many non-partisan reasons for Canada as a modern democracy to move to PR. These two are among the most compelling:

- "The case for [PR] is fundamentally the same as that for representative democracy. Only if an assembly represents the full diversity of opinion within a nation can its decisions be regarded as the decisions of the nation itself."
--Encyclopedia Britannica
- "The current 'first-past-the-post' system is undemocratic. On that ground alone, it needs to be replaced."
--The Economist [1991 Editorial]

Modernizing Voting

Canada, the U.S. and U.K. are the only major Western democracies still using the first-past-the-post system. Our election laws should no longer prescribe that the only voters electing MPs are those favouring each riding's most popular political party. Now the votes of those supporting minority parties — about seven million in the 2011 federal election — achieve nothing in terms of post-election representation. That model was created centuries ago and is simply out-dated for modern times.

The Parliament of Canada should initiate the most broadly acceptable model of proportional representation (PR) for electing members to the House of Commons, mostly because doing so would create a chamber where MPs are elected in proportion to votes received rather than our present winner-take-all system.

Strongest Democracies

Réal Lavergne adds: *“Among the world’s 35 strongest democracies, 25 use PR and only six use winner-take-all systems of one sort or another... Comparative research as compiled by Fair Vote Canada shows that countries with PR do better on a wide range of criteria, yielding a higher level of economic equality, greater representation of women in parliament, a more collegial style of politics, better economic management and better environmental performance.”*

Voter turnout in federal elections has declined across the country in recent years. One study indicated that voter turnout in PR elections is more than eight percent higher than those where the winner-takes-all.

Consider, for example, the results from some recent Canadian elections. In 2011, 39.6 per cent of the total national votes cast elected a Conservative "majority" government. In 1997, 38.5 per cent elected a Liberal “majority”. In 2015, The Liberals in 2015 got only about 39 per cent of the national vote, but won 180 seats, all the ridings in Atlantic Canada and one in Saskatchewan. If a major democratic goal is to treat all voters with respect by attempting to ensure that all votes count equally, results should be proportional.

A party’s share of the MPs in the House of Commons ought to reflect roughly how Canadians voted. If a party wins, say, 40 per cent of the votes cast nationally, they will under most PR models elect about the same percentage of MPs. More than 80 nations have created voting systems with at least some element of PR.

“Too much Democracy”

Opponents of PR claim that "too much democracy" reduces the possibility of forming effective governments, but the full list of nations using PR — including Germany, Switzerland and Sweden — indicates otherwise. PR does lead to frequent coalition governments, but political parties in Canada are already coalitions of often-concealed internal factions. Coalitions resulting from PR would be more representative of voters and negotiations would be more visible to Canadians than those done within parties behind caucus doors. Coalitions of two or more parties quite often appear to be closer to public opinion on issues than one-party governments.

Critics assert that PR encourages extremists to be elected, but overlook that in our present system vote splitting has allowed MPs to be elected with less than 30 per cent of the vote in their riding. In Germany's PR model, for example, parties require more than five per cent of the popular vote before being allowed a representative in the Bundestag.

PR implies more politicians, say critics, but the Law Commission of Canada for one recommends keeping the same number of MPs from each province and territory, but making every three ridings into two larger ones and adding regional MPs elected by voters unrepresented by the local election results. Choosing the best model of PR for Canadians today will be important. One that seems well-suited to us is the hybrid known as Mixed Member Proportional (MMP) used in Germany, New Zealand and elsewhere. Each elector gets two votes, with one being applied to a local district candidate whose election is determined by first-past-the-post. The other is applied to the national parties. The seats in Parliament are allocated on the basis of the votes going to each party. If not enough MPs are elected in constituencies to reflect a party's national vote, it gets additional seats from its national party list to "top up" its number of seats. Unless a party gets five per cent of the popular vote, it cannot add any seats from the national party list.

In short, the time to enact PR is now.

Merci bien.