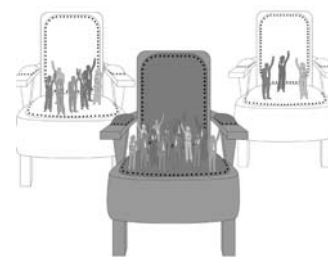


THE PR PATH TO DECENTRALIZATION



Brian Fitzgerald

Proportional representation (PR) is currently proposed as a solution to a large number of the country's political ills. Most of PR's supporters point to the encouraging experience of stable northern European democracies. But none of the countries usually mentioned suffers from Canadian-style regional or ethnic divisions. Three countries that do—Belgium, Italy and Spain—have had much less happy experiences. In the bargaining over who will form a government, regional parties have sold their support in exchange for devolution. The same could happen here.

Certains préconisent la représentation proportionnelle (RP) pour résoudre bon nombre des problèmes politiques qui affligent le Canada, la plupart de ses partisans faisant valoir l'encourageante stabilité des démocraties du nord de l'Europe. Or, aucun de ces pays ne souffre de divisions régionales ou ethniques comme en connaît le Canada. Dans trois pays où de telles divisions existent—la Belgique, l'Italie et l'Espagne—, l'application de la RP est beaucoup moins convaincante. Lors des négociations visant à déterminer le parti qui formera le gouvernement, les partis régionaux y ont bradé leur appui en échange d'une décentralisation des pouvoirs. La même chose pourrait se produire ici.

Electoral reform has emerged as the new panacea of the Canadian chattering classes. Several of Canada's most pressing governance problems can apparently be solved, or at least eased, by reforming the electoral system. Whether your concern is Western alienation, the sovereigntists' lock on power in Quebec City, the fading of the Canadian left in mainstream politics, plunging voting rates, or declining civic literacy, electoral reform offers itself as a solution. The only problem now is to persuade the apathetic Canadian citizenry, whose eyes unfortunately glaze over at the mention of electoral reform. That certainly seemed to be the prevailing attitude at the IRPP "Votes and Seats" conference in March, the papers from which appeared in the July-August issue of *Policy Options*. The assumption that reform was desirable was so prevalent it went virtually unspoken: discussion centred instead on what type of reform and how best to effect it.

There clearly are many problems with Canada's electoral system as currently constituted. Concerns that votes cast translate poorly into seats and worries about the absence of women and minorities in the provincial legislatures and in Parliament certainly deserve a place in the

debate. What is not merited, however, is the easy dismissal of potential negative consequences from the adoption of some style of proportional representation (PR). Among these are: micro-parties flitting from one constituency to another in search of the support that will keep them above water, crowds of MPs changing parties in mid-session, unstable governments (Italy is on its 57th government in the post-war era), the benefit PR commonly provides to far-right parties, and the transfer of the power to choose the government from the voters to political operatives meeting in conference rooms to assemble government coalitions through negotiation and peddling of favours.

PR proponents dismiss these arguments with bromides and by citing examples of PR's successes in, for instance, Australia, Germany, Austria and Scandinavia. But such lists are usually comprised of the most stable countries pursuing elections under a PR regime, and they are largely irrelevant to a Canadian experience that has often lacked stability. Australia, Germany, Austria and the Scandinavian countries are comparatively homogeneous, without the significant divides along racial, linguistic or regional lines that can lead to the creation of parties confined to one constituency or

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region, or both. When theorizing about Canada under a PR regime the most appropriate cases to examine are countries with similar cleavages: Belgium, Spain and, arguably, Italy. Like Canada, Belgium is divided between two large, politicized, linguistic groups; Spain has a multiplicity of regional groupings of various degrees of distinctiveness; and Italy, though unilingual, is in the thrall of a political battle pitting the rich North against the poorer South.

A PR electoral system encourages minority nationalist agendas by lowering the barriers to representation for small parties that serve narrow interests and by granting many such parties a decisive role in government formation. With PR systems, parties can fracture at will—if no vote is wasted, then no party creation is wasted. It is harder to contain a rabble of diverse factions within the frame of a party identity under a PR system, as the penalty for going it alone is much lower. Under such a regime, some of the uneasy partnerships in Canadian politics, such as those assembled by Mulroney under the PC banner, or Manning as the United Alternative then Canadian Alliance, likely would have fallen apart much sooner, if they'd ever existed.

Key to each of those coalitions, and key to these considerations, is the presence of regionalists—Québécois in the first coalition, Westerners in the second—whose adherence to those broad groupings was strengthened by a first-past-the-post (FPTP) system that made striking out alone a risky venture. Spain's parliament has seated 11 parties representing seven minority ethnic groups. In Belgium, four seated parties base their support on linguistic appeal, and the rest of the party structure (Liberal/Christian Democrat/Socialist/Green) is split along linguistic lines. In our own case, what would stop the creation of a party representing Native concerns, or those of Acadians or Albertans? The Newfoundland and Yukon Parties already have formal structures and people on the ground—they'd be running where they already run, and dealing with people and issues they already have, even if any winning candidates were destined for Ottawa rather than St. John's or Whitehorse. Such a proliferation of regional parties certainly runs counter to a centralist conception of Canada, but a greater threat to that conception is the new-found power such parties would enjoy in a PR system.

The exact placement of the political "centre" obviously varies from country to country—falling comparatively to the left in Sweden and to

the right in the United States. The usual definition of the ideological centre is, of course, the point the apex of the relevant population's bell curve, and in most systems the parties, following the population, are arrayed roughly in balance on the left and the right. The translation of that curve into electoral results can, however, be distorted by the electoral system in use.

The Canadian party system clearly does not follow this model, with the Liberals having since 1993 successfully occupied both the centre and centre-left, in opposition to the PCs, Reform and then the Canadian Alliance on its right. The Liberals' current dominance is rooted in the FPTP system, which has rewarded it with seats spilling across the aisle in the House of Commons. By contrast, a PR model would have made it a minority party in 2000. FPTP systems have nurtured and maintained other dominant parties, such as Italy's Christian Democrats (DCI) and Mexico's Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI). PR results in more accurate representation of voters' preferences across the spectrum. It makes it much easier for disaffected voters to respond to disappointment with the current parties by changing affiliation or creating a new party. The patchwork of interests that today votes Liberal might split under a PR party system. This patchwork includes many ideological nodes not fully represented in our legislatures yet, as well as expressions of regionalism and nationalism that vary in degree and origin: alienated Westerners, Maritimers who feel patronized or nationalist Québécois not yet sold on independence. Even if the system remains unchanged, the crippled state of the PRI and the recent disappearance of the Christian Democrats in Italy should serve as a warning to those who think one-party dominance can be sustainable or even inevitable in a Western democracy.

In many PR systems, control of the government shifts from the left bloc to the right bloc, according to a mix of variables such as government performance, the leader's personality and increasingly, scandal. These blocs can be individual parties (such as the Socialists and Social Democrats in Portugal) or groups of like-minded parties (as in the case of France). In Canada, however, as in Spain and Belgium, there is a third political force at the federal level: regionalists. Rather than endure the restrictions of a minority government, leftists and rightists will often choose to align themselves with a regionalist party to push themselves to a majority. Rather

than splitting the vote 50-50, the left and right may each harvest about 45 per cent of the votes, and the regionalist parties the remaining 10 per cent. Such a 45-45-10 division isn't a problem under the FPTP system because of the significant winner's bonus which that system typically bestows upon the leading party—and which in last year's federal election translated 41 per cent of the votes into 57 per cent of the seats. While the current system tops off the Bloc Québécois' votes in Quebec, and the Alliance's in Alberta, the winner's bonus recently has gone to the party that is most competitive across the country, namely, the Liberals.

This winner's bonus, which is often held to be one of the more egregious defects of the FPTP system, in fact eases the path of the leading party or bloc of parties to government. A more faithful translation of the votes garnered in Canada would produce either a minority or coalition government. As the experiences of countries with cleavages similar to Canada's demonstrate, putting either a centrist or ideologically flexible regionalist party or bloc between large left-wing and right-wing formations seeking power casts it as kingmaker and leads almost automatically to decentralization. Time and again, parties trying to form a government have been only too willing to trade a degree of decentralization for a term in power. As a result, the regionalists achieve significant items on their agenda, and can rationalize working with their ideological rivals by arguing that devolution leaves them increasingly invulnerable to what they may otherwise regard as distasteful policies. In this way, they are able to tilt between the left and the right as electoral necessity requires, which is an invaluable asset for a regionalist party that wants to be truly effective. The experiences of the *Convèrgencia i Unió* (Convergence and Union or CiU) in Spain, the *Volksumie* (People's Union) in Belgium and the *Lega Nord* (Northern League) in Italy demonstrate this conclusively.

The Northern League rode to popularity on the frustration of many Northern Italians with a perceived culture of greed and corruption which diverted their tax dollars southward. In campaign literature promoting its plan for a federal Italy, the *Lega Nord* railed against the spending of tax dollars in the "rotten, Soviet-style state-run economy" of a South governed by "local bosses ... with good gunmen." The League joined with Silvio Berlusconi's *Forza Italia* in a right-wing government in 1994, pushing for the feder-

alization of Italy so as to avoid such waste of Northern tax dollars. The government that it helped set in place launched an admittedly slow-motion process toward that end. After this year's election of *Forza Italia*, the leader of the Northern League assumed the cabinet post responsible for reform and decentralisation, even though Berlusconi can hold a majority in the current parliament without the party's support. To Berlusconi, a slight devolution of Rome's power is a small price to pay for assured continuation in government.

In Belgium, meanwhile, it is the Flemish nationalist *Volksumie* which has benefited most from the freewheeling Belgian party system. It had its first taste of federal power after its 1977 entry under the "Egmont Pact," a blueprint for a comprehensive and far-reaching process of constitutional decentralization that was negotiated by a Martens government eager for a chance to run the country, and willing to meet whatever price might be exacted by would-be coalition partners. This agreement outlined the initial steps for the rapid decentralization that today leaves Belgium's linguistic communities responsible for their own foreign affairs on many aspects of governance and has also given them near-exclusive jurisdiction on linguistic and cultural policy, as well as significant taxation and spending powers.

The starkest example of regionalists' impact on the direction of government is that offered by the *Convèrgencia i Unió* in Spain. A federation of two Catalan nationalist parties, the CiU held the balance of power in Madrid throughout much of the 1990s. After each federal election, the party leader, Jordi Pujol, assured support to whichever of the competing coalitions was ready to offer the greatest devolution. Ideological concerns were secondary: when Felipe Gonzalez's Socialists lost ground during the 1996 election, the CiU remained in government by switching to an alliance with the rightist Popular Party. Its priority is always policies and powers to benefit Catalans and its strategy has proved remarkably successful: Catalonia exercises more significant powers than any other region of Spain except the similarly empowered Basque region. It has increased control over taxation and spending, as well as the power to promote use of the Catalan language.

Europe's various nationalist groups have used the stick as well as the carrot to advance their agendas, at times forcefully demonstrating the federal parties' need for their support. In

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Spain, Mr. Pujol constantly refined the definition and degree of the CiU's co-operation with the Gonzalez government before quietly backpedalling away when the election came. In Italy, the Northern League let the first *Forza Italia* government fall when it became unhappy with the third partner in the coalition—even though polls were forecasting, correctly as it turned out, the election of a rival coalition. Government by threat is unpleasant enough when it dominates the Ottawa-Quebec City relationship; the idea that it would also become the order of the day in the federal Parliament is even more disturbing. Revulsion against such tactics in the rest of the country likely would not render them ineffective: both the CiU and Northern League remain in government today, despite their respective histories of strong-arm tactics.

To be sure, circumstances are different in Europe, where the over-riding sovereignty of the EU is a backdrop, but the principle and strategy remain the same. Under a PR system, regionalist and nationalist parties would have unprecedented power over the formation and agenda of the Canadian government. As we have seen, regionalist blocs and parties have proved ready to join coalitions when their asking price of further decentralization has been satisfied. A similar situation could unfold after some future election in Canada: The NDP, Liberals and Greens together get 45 per cent of the votes (as they did in 2000) and the current incarnations of the right receive a comparable amount. The party or parties representing Quebec nationalism and/or *indépendantisme* on the federal scene harvest the remainder, possibly in concert with a party playing on Albertan/Western alienation. Under the current system, the left receives a top-up bonus and goes on to form a government. In the PR scenario, however, the regionalists put their support on the auc-

tion block. As happened in the European examples previously mentioned, we could fully expect a bidding war to solicit the regionalists' or separatists' support for a coalition government. If neither side bids high enough, a minority government forms and falls in short order: the non-regionalists learn their lesson *à la* Messrs. Berlusconi and Gonzalez. The *dénouement* is easy to sketch out: the left pushes for further provincial input in tax policy (defining the federal has ** etc.) to the provinces, the right counters by recalling its roots in Western discontent and offers a higher profile for provincial representatives abroad, and so on until an agreement is concluded.

Even if such a scenario would arise only once every 20 years, that is often enough. The Chrétien Liberals may continue to monopolize the prime minister's office for the near future, but the right will get lucky at some point, evening up the score and creating such a balance of power. How many party leaders, having worked most of a lifetime to become prime minister, would be averse to slipping the provinces one or two or even more powers to reach such a position? Politicians have done much more for much less in return.

In the end, proportional representation emerges as a new path to Claude Morin's dream of *étapisme*. Rather than having to struggle for additional powers in hearings or media-carried invective, decentralists are offered more and more in return for votes on issues of minor importance to the average nationalist. Questions of the justice of "wasted votes," of the representation of women and minorities in Canada today are all legitimate and worthy of study. But the negative effects of electoral reform, including a likely wave of decentralization, should not be forgotten either.

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29 August 1939 This is like one of those dreams in which images appear in incongruous juxtaposition... At the end of the quiet stuccoed streets hang the great silver elephants of the balloon barrage floating airily high in the evening sky. These captive monsters may be seen between their ascents pinned to the ground in the parks or public places—lying exhausted, breathing faintly with the passing puffs of wind. While the general London scene is the same, there are oddities of detail—brown paper pasted over fan-lights and walled-in windows on the ground floors of the buildings, the sandbags

around hospitals and museums, the coffin-like enclosures around the statues in the central court of the Foreign Office. And there are odd tableaux too—glimpses of people in shirt-sleeves digging air-raid shelters in their back gardens, or offices debouching typewriters and desks for removal to country premises. Then there is the outcropping of uniforms, raw-looking young soldiers in very new uniforms unload themselves from Army trucks and stand about awkwardly in front of public buildings...

Charles RITCHIE, *The Siren Years*