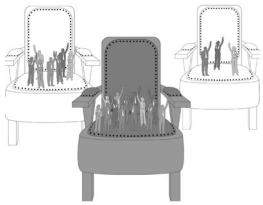
ELECTORAL REFORM: LESSONS FROM THE IRISH?



Simon Dalby

Suggestions that a system of proportional representation would help reduce Canada's current electoral imbalance always founder on the objection that Canadians want constituency representation. But the Irish model of a single transferable vote within multi-member ridings would achieve the best of both worlds: better representation for minority parties, including regional parties, but by MPs elected from well-defined ridings. Ridings would have to be larger and the vote would take slightly longer to count, but this is a small price to pay for a parliament that better reflects Canadians' preferences.

Les appels en faveur d'un système de représentation proportionnelle pour corriger l'actuel déséquilibre électoral au Canada se heurtent toujours à l'objection selon laquelle les Canadiens préfèrent être représentés par circonscription. Mais le modèle irlandais d'un vote unique transférable au sein de circonscription à plusieurs députés offrirait le meilleur des deux mondes : une plus grande représentativité des partis minoritaires, y compris les partis régionaux, par des députés élus dans des circonscriptions bien délimitées. Un tel système nécessiterait chez nous des circonscriptions plus étendues et un décompte des voix un peu plus long, mais ce serait un prix fort modeste à payer en échange d'un Parlement qui reflète mieux les préférences des Canadiens.

When Canadians think of Ireland and politics they usually think of guns, bombs, the IRA and the apparently interminable "peace process" in the Northern part of the island. Surely not the kind of place that might offer a model of politics with anything to teach us! But the other part of Ireland, the Republic in the South, has an electoral system that might give Canadians a practical alternative model to the current "first-past-the-post" system. It's one that would much better represent the preferences of the voters when seats are assigned in the House of Commons.

Imagine two Alliance MPs, a Liberal and a Conservative elected from Calgary. Or a situation somewhere in the Toronto suburbs where there is one Alliance member, an NDP member, a Conservative and two Liberals. These are the kind of results that the Irish system could have provided if it had been used in last November's federal election. Given the recent pattern of votes, that kind of distribution would surely be fairer, and better for the country too, than the current Liberal dominance in Ontario and the Alliance dominance in Alberta.

Suggestions for Canadian electoral reform nearly all focus on proportional representation, but then quickly express two concerns about the results. The first is that political instability might result from having too many small parties in Parliament. Israel and Italy are held up as examples of unstable government due to the oddities of those countries' electoral systems. But Ireland is a prosperous democracy with a sometimes very partisan, but nevertheless very stable parliamentary system and only a few small parties.

The second objection to proportional representation is that Canadians living in a country characterized by great regional diversity are, not surprisingly, reluctant to consider a system where representatives are selected from a central national party list, as happens in many proportional representation systems, rather than elected in local constituencies.

The Irish electoral system combines the best of both worlds—members from geographically defined constituencies who have been elected in a closer approximation to the proportion of the total number of votes cast for a party nationally. Very rarely have small parties or independents

had undue influence on government policies.

The trick is to use a form of proportional representation within multi-seat constituencies. Representatives of as many as three or even four parties can all simultaneously be elected to represent a single area. The constituencies naturally are larger but the representation is much fairer.

For the voter the practical details of the "single transferable vote" (STV) system that the Irish use aren't all that different from the usual Canadian way of doing things. On election day voters get to vote for candidates in order of their preference. They do so simply by putting a "1" opposite their preferred candidate on the ballot, a "2" beside their second preference and so on right down the list, making sure that the party or person they least want elected is ranked at the very bottom. If a voter's first-choice candidate either doesn't need their vote, because they have enough to get elected, or has too few votes to be elected, the vote is transferred to the voter's second choice and so on. Many fewer votes are wasted and tactical voting is avoided. Parties can nominate as many candidates as there are seats in each constituency to try to get more than one representative elected in each riding. This is what might give the results imagined above for Calgary and a suburb of Toronto.

In Ireland even government parties that are unpopular rarely suffer electoral devastation on the scale of the Canadian Tory defeat of 1993. Unpopular parties may be seriously reduced in the number of seats they hold, but are more likely to remain a force in parliament.

Worried about a regionally fractured parliament? The single transferable vote system would have the huge advantage of allowing strong regional representatives to have a voice but does not exclude representatives with a more pan-Canadian view than their strong-regionalist colleagues. Independent candidates can be elected on a platform to promote a regional agenda but sending such favourite sons need not deny the region any representation by a national party in the process.

Just think what such an electoral system would do for the House of Commons in Canada. The Alliance's strong results in the West might have allowed it to elect as many as three members in a five-seat constituency in some places, but the Tories and the Liberals would probably also have elected a member each. The Liberals would not be shut out of the Western provinces, far from it, and the Alliance would also have a more national voice, with some seats in Ontario and possibly even a few in the Maritimes, too.

The STV provides many other possible benefits. In such a system there is little chance of the awkward result in which a prime minister loses his seat, which was a distinct possibility in 1997. Even if the party leader does not finish atop the poll, he or she is very likely to be elected in one of the additional spots in a multiple-seat arrangement. Parties struggling to find ways to assure gender equity can put both men and women on the ballot in each constituency. Likewise, ethnic diversity is easier to accommodate, thus making electoral politics more inclusive.

A minor benefit that Western Canadians and many journalists would appreciate is that, due to the greater complexity of the counting process, which in Ireland happens the day after the vote, results come in slowly, so there would be no problems with time zones and regional media blackouts. Western alienation would be reduced, while the lengthy television coverage of the slower count would make for better analysis and greater drama, too.

In Ireland even government parties that are unpopular rarely suffer electoral devastation on the scale of the Canadian Tory defeat of 1993. Unpopular parties may be seriously reduced in the number of seats they hold, but are more likely to remain a force in parliament. This offers another form of political stability by precluding the wild swings in representation that the Westminster system always threatens when a government is very unpopular going into an election.

Another advantage of STV is that it is virtually impossible for a government to be formed by a party, or parties, with a vote that falls significantly short of 50 per cent of the total of votes cast. No longer would majority governments be formed with just the 43 per cent of the vote that kept the Mulroney government in power in 1988, or the 38 per cent that preserved the Liberal parliamentary majority in 1997.

Fears of political instability and complex coalition arrangements as a result of proportional representation are not borne out by the Irish political process. It's true that the operation of the electoral system there is complicated by historical divisions that have sometimes prevented the obvious centre-left ideological coalition of *Fianna Fáil* and Labour from forming the government, but then Canadian politics is no stranger to historical differences and ideological division, either.

There are now increasing calls for the reform of parliamentary procedure and institutions in Ottawa. What better way is there to encourage wider participation in the committee process of Parliament than by changing the electoral system to enhance the representation of the smaller parties and hence force serious political negotiation between

government coalition parties? Backbenchers would often matter much more then.

On the downside of STV, the counting of votes would be slightly more complicated. But if the Irish can count such votes reliably, so too could Canadians. The European Union's elections use a similar system. Why not Canada?

True, the vote count has to be undertaken in a single central counting station for each constituency. Because of the greater distances involved in Canadian elections this would probably slow the count down in the very large northern constituencies that would result from amalgamating some of the present single-seat ridings. But if the Americans can wait five weeks to find out who their president is, as they had to last year, Canadians presumably could wait a couple of days to see who would become prime minister. (And there would be no dimpled chads or machine count errors to worry about during the wait.)

While we are at it, the Irish upper house of parliament, the Seanad, or Senate, might also offer some useful models for reform of the Canadian Senate. The Seanad is partly appointed by the prime minister but partly elected by sectoral groups from across Irish society. These groups are chosen without regard for geographical considerations. For example, at every general election, Irish university graduates, regardless of where they live, inside or outside the Republic, vote by mail for members of special university seats in the Senate. There are plenty of possibilities here for Canadian innovations—guaranteed seats, for instance, for francophones, women, ethnic minorities, First Nations peoples, people from the far North or even new immigrants. Distinct society status and regional issues might become less of a political problem if an upper house actively represented crucial parts of the polity on sectoral rather than geographical lines.

In a parliament with five official parties and representation by seats that is far removed from the percentage and regionally expressed voting preferences of the electorate, electoral reform is long overdue. The Irish economic model has been an inspiration for economic reformers in recent years. Perhaps it's time that Canadians had a hard look at the Irish political model as a means for rejuvenating Canadian electoral politics.

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