

THE REAL DEMOCRATIC DEFICIT: OUR PARLIAMENTARY SYSTEM

Former NDP Leader Ed Broadbent, who returned to the House of Commons last month as MP from Ottawa Centre, believes a mixed proportional system is the best solution to the democratic deficit existing under our first-past-the-post system of representation. In an address to New Brunswick's Roundtable on Proportional Representation, he outlines his reasons and suggests the British Columbia Citizens Assembly as a model process.

Selon l'ancien chef du NPD Ed Broadbent, qui vient de réintégrer la Chambre des communes à titre de député de la circonscription Ottawa-Centre, un régime mixte de représentation proportionnelle est la meilleure solution au déficit démocratique induit par notre système majoritaire à un tour. Dans une allocution prononcée devant la Table ronde sur la représentation proportionnelle du Nouveau-Brunswick, il explique pourquoi et propose comme modèle le processus de l'Assemblée des citoyens de la Colombie-Britannique.

Until recently in Canada, for someone to launch into a discussion at a social function about proportional representation (PR) was the quickest way of getting the eyes of the selected victim to glaze over. I know from experience. In the 1950s I wrote an undergraduate paper calling for PR in Canada for Paul Fox, a leading scholar of Canadian politics, at the University of Toronto. Ever a generous man, he gave me a good mark but his concluding comment in terms of its then political relevance to Canada was shattering: "ingenious but ingenuous." Not deterred by this academic put down, later as a politician in the 1970s I strongly supported a resolution on this subject which was adopted by my party. This was, of course, ignored by my party colleagues — and worse still, by the people of Canada. As leader, ever in pursuit of worthy causes, at the end of 1970s, I submitted a proposal for a mixed first-past-the-post and PR system to the Pepin-Robarts Commission which to my delight went along with the idea. I

was ecstatic, momentarily forgetting that the best way of ensuring that nothing happens on an issue in Canadian politics is to get a Royal Commission to recommend it. Parenthetically, I should note that Jean-Luc Pepin once told me that whenever there was some politically dead-end issue to be dealt with, Trudeau asked him to take it on.

In the real world of politics, the first time the major political relevance of Canada's archaic, pre-democratic, regionally divisive, non-inclusive electoral system hit home was after the 1980 federal election.

Shortly following the election Pierre Trudeau asked me to meet with him. The subject of our subsequent discussion was his proposal that I join the cabinet. I thought he was joking. After all, he had just obtained a so-called mandate from the people of Canada in the form of a majority government. I said to him that I would of course need other members of the NDP to be included. He replied, "How many do you want?" I said, "We will need five or

six and a couple of major portfolios." He looked at me and said, "You've got them." It was clear he wasn't joking.

Trudeau then proceeded to explain why after having obtained a majority of seats, he was making this unusual request. He explained that he planned to introduce in the coming session of Parliament what turned out to be two of the most important and divisive measures in recent political history: the National Energy Program and the repatriation of the constitution combined with a charter of rights. He observed that he was aware that in general outline NDP policies on both matters were quite close to his own thinking.

In our discussions, it quickly transpired that because such an agenda would not only be highly controversial in substance but also potentially regionally divisive, he wanted us in the cabinet because in comparative terms, in numbers of seats, the NDP was electorally strong in Western Canada and the Liberals were not. We had 26 MPs in the four provinces. He had none in BC, none

in Alberta and none in Saskatchewan, and only two in Manitoba.

I want to focus on two related and overlapping points that show how negatively our electoral system influenced subsequent Canadian history. The first is that notwithstanding the fact that the Liberals obtained almost 25 percent of the votes in Western Canada in 1980, because of our pre-democratic electoral system, Trudeau's government was virtually blanked out in terms of seats. Instead of the 20 MPs their share of the vote warranted, in terms of the popular vote, as I

Pierre Trudeau asked me to meet with him. The subject of our subsequent discussion was his proposal that I join the cabinet. I thought he was joking. After all, he had just obtained a so-called mandate from the people of Canada in the form of a majority government. I said to him that I would of course need other members of the NDP to be included. He replied, "How many do you want?" I said, "We will need five or six and a couple of major portfolios." He looked at me and said, "You've got them." It was clear he wasn't joking.

have said, the Liberals had only two. The Liberals, as has been said so misleadingly so often, were then seen in Western Canada to be a party of Eastern Canada (read: Ontario and Quebec). One of the serious consequences is that disagreement in Western Canada with controversial proposals by Liberals is almost invariably portrayed by opposition parties, even when there is no objective reason for doing so, as "Those Easterners are doing it to us again." When a quarter of all the votes in Western Canada are not reflected in the membership in the caucus and cabinet, differences about substance get transformed for partisan purposes into conflicts between regions. Parliament is seen to be out of touch with Canadians because its membership doesn't accurately reflect how Canadians actually voted. National unity suffers. Canada suffers.

There is a serious democratic deficit and credibility problem in Canada when the only votes counting for seats are those which are cast for the candidate who gets the most votes in a first-past-the-post constituency. The system is

equally bad for federal opposition parties. Reform under Preston Manning's leadership did not get blanked-out by Canadians in Ontario. Notwithstanding a substantial popular vote of 20 percent in Ontario, it got blanked-out by our undemocratic electoral system. Thus, instead of a new political party arising in the West and successfully expanding in the East with a number of MP's reflecting its popular support, it remained locked-out and was then dangerously and misleadingly described by the media as a "mere" Western party. Is it any wonder

that thousands of Western Canadians feel alienated from their nation's capital? Or that the 20 percent in Ontario who voted for Reform have increasingly felt that their votes are irrelevant?

If we look at the shaping of the substance of policy in my 1980 example, again we see how counter-productive the Canadian electoral system is. Both in the initial drafting of bills that made up the National Energy Program and in their subsequent discussion and amendment at the committee stage, I believe that a Liberal caucus and government in 1980 that more accurately reflected Western Canadian votes would have led to material differences in the substance of the legislated program. Had the democratic right of every citizen's vote to be counted equally in its impact on seats in the House been present and had there been a number of Liberals from each of the Western provinces to explain national policy, inter-regional conflict on both the constitution and the National Energy Program would have at the very least been reduced.

The failure of the Liberals to obtain seats in Western Canada anywhere proportional to their vote was by no means an isolated incident. I recently looked at the data for the four federal elections that took place since I left politics in 1989 (1993, 1997, 2000, 2004). There is a persistent failure of Western Canadians to get the Liberals they voted for elected. In each of the three provinces (Saskatchewan, Alberta and B.C.), in virtually every election, large numbers voted Liberal but only a handful of Liberals were elected. The disparity over time was worst in Alberta. Is it any wonder that in the West Albertans are most recently seen to be the most alienated from their national government? Of course, not just electoral representation but also matters of substance play a role in regional discontent. However, I repeat the point I made earlier: the absence of equitable representation in caucus and cabinet

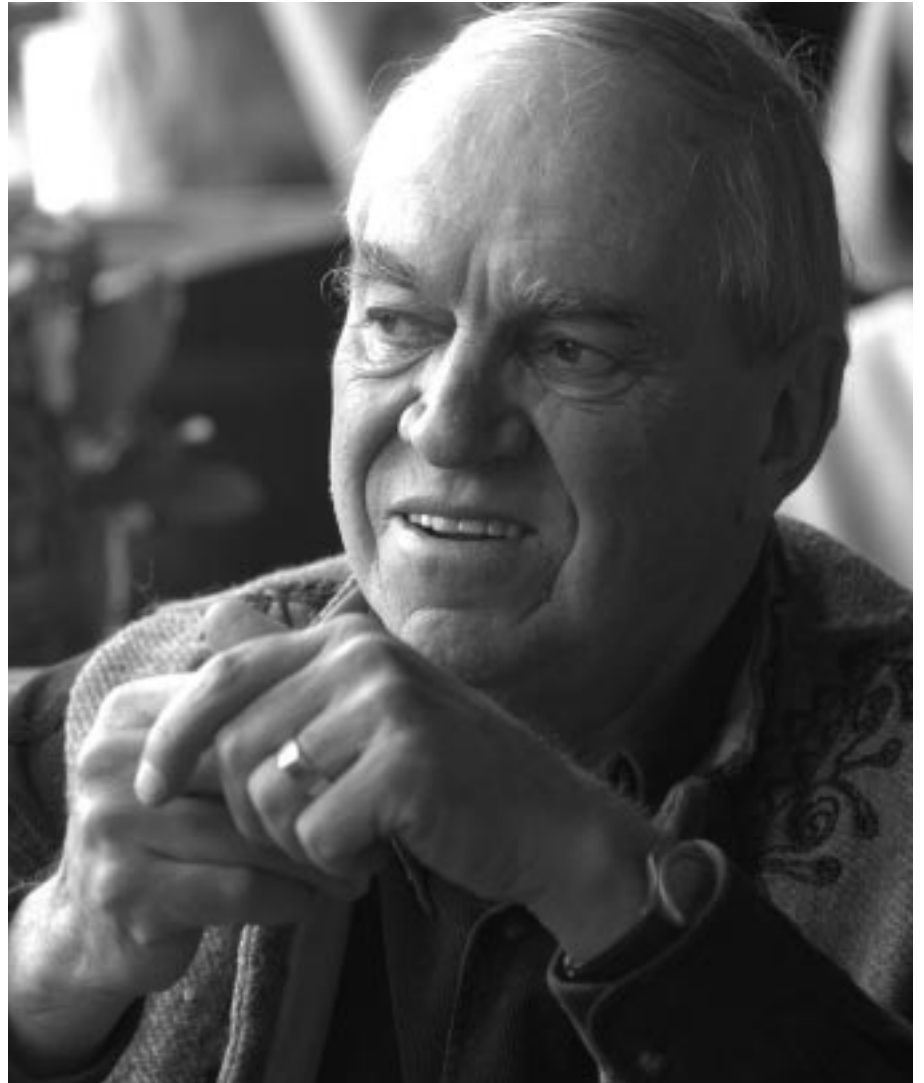
plays a significant role in producing an imbalance in the substance of policy as well as weakness in persuading the public to accept it. Does anyone here in New Brunswick doubt that changes made in Employment Insurance and Fishery policies on the eve of the recent federal election were directly due to short-run fears by the Liberals — that unless these changes were made they would lose seats? My point is all regions deserve an electoral system that will ensure impact in Ottawa is equitably distributed. All caucuses deserve a system that ensures representation from all regions proportional to votes cast.

I have put particular emphasis on the negative impact our electoral system can have on governments, particularly on the Liberals, because they have most often been in power. However, I also want to emphasize the impact on the opposition. A central value of our parliamentary system is seen to reside in having a strong, representative opposition. Once again the system militates disastrously against this. In Ottawa, more often than not opposition parties

are not only weaker in numbers than their votes would justify, they also tend to be over-represented in some provinces (witness the Conservatives in Alberta) and under-represented in others (witness the NDP and Conservatives in Quebec). This inevitably causes opposition parties, not just the government, to have a distorted view of the so-called national interest. In understanding regional concerns and in shaping national policies, 21 years of political experience have taught me it matters a great deal for all regions to be equitably represented in both the government and opposition. Our present undemocratic electoral system fails us completely in this area on both sides of the House.

The failure of our electoral system to provide an effective opposition is ever more glaringly seen at the provincial level. The people of New Brunswick and P.E.I. know very well from recent history that opposition parties can be virtually wiped out in our system. Today in British Columbia there is a Liberal government vastly over-represented in seats and no official opposition in spite of the fact that thousands of citizens from one end of the province to the other voted for the NDP.

Recent polls show that most Canadians now believe that it is unfair and unacceptable that a party should obtain power without having the support of the majority. Certainly more than any at any other time in my political life our electoral system is being called into question. In my view this is not only because of serious concerns about the negative impact on national unity of our regionally divisive system or its failure to produce equitably representative governments and opposition parties. As the recent polls showing our disapproval as “unfair” of governments that lack majority support indicate, increasingly we Canadians believe that our electoral system should cohere with or help promote a broad range of democratic values and principles. Voter turn out, the role of women, the place of minorities, the participation of youth, consensual or adversarial politics — these issues and others



NDP Photo

“In Ottawa, more often than not, opposition parties are not only weaker in numbers than their votes would justify,” says Ed Broadbent, “they also tend to be over-represented in some provinces and under-represented in others.” He sees a mixed proportional model as the answer.

are finally surfacing in public debates about our electoral system.

I do not believe that “government by referendum” is a good general policy. Quite the contrary. Referendums on the vast majority of subjects are normally highly divisive, lack the deliberative process that elected Parliaments are expected to engage in and can be serious threats to minority rights. However, when restricted to establishing the democratic rules of the electoral system applicable equally to all citizens and when the question is preceded by a

thorough deliberative process involving the citizens themselves, it seems to me such a referendum fully measures up to the democratic aspirations and values of classical democratic theorists like John Stuart Mill. I believe the citizens of British Columbia are now involved in exactly this kind of democratic process and are showing us what can and should be done at the national level.

Before presenting a case for adopting the BC model for a process leading to electoral reform at the national level I want briefly to sketch in the reasons for my personal preference for a mixed

system of proportional representation and first-past-the-post. No one I know who has actually been a member of Parliament believes we should abolish individual constituencies. Citizens must continue to have the right to vote for a particular candidate for their region or community.

The failure of our electoral system to provide an effective opposition is ever more glaringly seen at the provincial level. The people of New Brunswick and P.E.I. know very well from recent history that opposition parties can be virtually wiped out in our system. Today in British Columbia there is a Liberal government vastly over-represented in seats and no Official Opposition in spite of the fact that thousands of citizens from one end of the province to the other voted for the NDP.

Empirical evidence drawn from other countries strongly suggests women and minorities will be much better represented in the House of Commons. The impact on the percentage of citizens who vote would likely be positive in the short-run, but over time considerations other than the electoral system will likely have a greater impact on voter turnout. We will have fewer one-party governments because Canadians, like citizens in the vast majority of democracies, like to exercise their democratic right by voting for a number of different parties, including new parties like the Greens. As in most of the stable democracies in continental Europe we will come to experience coalition or multi-party governments as a normal and desirable condition of democratic life. Our MPs will be more likely to listen to each other in part because they have to and in part because over time they begin to internalize the view that their political opponents have as much interest in the common good and as many ideas about how to achieve it as they do. I, for one, will welcome the day when the mindless exchanges in our Question Period cease to be the standard by which Canadians judge our national political behaviour.

The BC Citizens' Assembly process is unique not only in Canada but, as far as I know, in the world. It is a remarkable example of what grassroots democratic

consultation and decision-making should be all about. Very briefly stated, the Assembly is made up of 160 "ordinary citizens" divided equally on a gender basis with two persons from each of the provincial constituencies, plus two specified First Nation's representatives. All of these citizens were selected in a

methodologically neutral, non-partisan manner to represent an accurate cross section of the general population of British Columbia.

It was also a requirement that none of the participants could have had senior political experience in any political party going back to, and including, the last two election periods. This Assembly, which will report to the B.C. government before the end of this year, is to recommend one of the following two options on the electoral system: either maintain the status quo or provide a detailed alternative. The government has given both private and public assurance that if a recommendation other than the status quo is taken by the Assembly, it will put forth the precise question, as recommended, on the referendum. The referendum would then take place at the time of next provincial election in June 2005. A recent meeting of the Assembly in Vancouver affirmed that some form of proportional representation will almost certainly be recommended.

One of the most important aspects of this Assembly project is that it has captured the full engagement of all 162 participants. I believe because people know the Assembly's decision, not that of a parliamentary committee, will directly determine the referendum

question. They will make this decision only after thorough consideration of all the plausible options. Their recommendation will then be voted on by the people of BC.

I believe the House of Commons should adopt the BC process as a model for the reform of our federal electoral system. Some key points that would have to be included if such an Assembly were to be Canada-wide: bilingual service, bilingual co-chairs (one man and one woman), keeping size down to where effective communication is possible (one man and one woman for every four constituencies would keep the number close to the effective B.C. model). Each province would have the same percentage of members as they now have seats in the House of Commons. I also believe that the final outcome need not entail an increase in the numbers of MPs. Parliament embarked on this process during this session, by learning from the operational experience of British Columbia. A citizen-created referendum question could be ready in between 18 months and two years. Indeed, the process could be scheduled to culminate in the summer of 2006, when Canada's Citizens' Assembly could actually use the House of Commons chamber (during the Parliamentary recess) to reach their final recommendation. How exciting this would be.

The prime minister said during the recent election campaign that he favoured democratic reform, indeed that he would be open to considering proportional representation. Britain has changed, Australia has changed, New Zealand has changed, our provinces have changed. It's a democratic idea whose time has come.

Excerpted from an address to the "Public Roundtable on Proportional Representation," organized by the New Brunswick Commission on Legislative Democracy, in Moncton, on September 23, 2004.