

Brief on the Draft Bill for Electoral Reform

By: Bruce Durrant

Introduction

After every election, it seems, there is a call for electoral reform. The reason is usually because the winning Party has received many more seats than what it deserves on the basis of the popular vote. The winning Party may get 60% of the seats although it only received 45% of the vote. Maybe this is what keeps Party Leaders awake at night, but it is not the primary thing on my mind, or the minds of most voters. What gives me nightmares is the fact that a local candidate can be elected with only 35% of the popular vote. This member then feels that he/she has been given a mandate to represent the constituency and voice opinions that, in fact, 65% of the voters rejected.

Due to our particular circumstances in this province, voters are always put in the position of not wanting to “split the vote”. Strategic voting is detrimental to the democratic process. It prevents the voter from feeling free to choose a candidate or Party which he truly prefers. Instead he chooses to vote for the candidate that he feels is most able to defeat the PQ. The issue of separation clouds all other issues. He is unable to indicate his support for other policies and issues for fear of allowing a separatist candidate to win.

Minority Parties get squeezed out because of strategic voting. Voters may be in favour of the Green Party or the Equality Party or the Rhinoceros Party but do not vote for them because of that single big issue of independence. It may even be true that some pro-independence voters also feel they must vote PQ, when they really prefer the policies of another Party.

These problems lead some to recommend that we should have a proportional representation system, where we would vote for the Party and then the Parties would be allocated seats based on their proportion of the vote. In other words if a Party gets 40% of the province-wide vote, then it would get 40% of the seats. This would appear to be fairer, but the people that would occupy those seats would then be chosen by the Party, not by the people.

Proponents within the Anglophone community suggest that if we had a proportional system, we would have been able to elect more Equality candidates and would have been better represented in the National Assembly. I would agree that the Equality Party would have had more elected members, but I don't think we would have been better represented. In fact, I think we would have lost a lot of our influence in Quebec politics.

The Government, in the Draft Bill for Electoral Reform, has proposed a mixed-member proportional electoral system. This tries to blend the two systems together. The number of electoral divisions (ridings) would be reduced from 125 to 75 (with an extra 2 for Nunavik and Îles-de-la-Madeleine). Each of these divisions would elect a member in the same old, flawed, way. However, every three divisions would be grouped into Electoral

districts and another two seats in the National Assembly would be given to each district awarded on a proportional basis. This method does help to let our Leaders sleep at night, but does nothing to alleviate my nightmares.

Another method, which I support, is one where we have a preliminary vote to choose the two candidates for each riding, and then a final vote to select our representative. Along with some other changes, this would solve many of the problems of our electoral system. Even though this system is followed in some other countries (like France) it has not been given much consideration because people in North America like to have their elections completed in one day. If we want true electoral reform, we have to look at the election process as being an ongoing process rather than one we pull out of the closet every 4 years or so.

Proportional Representation

Parties would receive the number of seats based upon the percentage of the popular vote. If a Party gets 30% of the vote, it would get 38 seats in the 125 seat National Assembly. If the Party got 60% of the popular vote, they would get 75 seats. That would seem to be fair, wouldn't it? The problem is how do those seats actually get filled with people? It would be the Party that would choose the actual members that would sit in the National Assembly. The Party would, no doubt, pick the best and most capable Party members to sit. Unfortunately, I fear, they would owe their loyalty to the Party brass than to the ridings they should represent. Indeed, would there still be ridings at all? The popular vote is counted on a province wide basis. Individual ridings would not be necessary. If they were set up, there would be no need for the "representative" to even come visit. After all, his/her loyalty is to the Party.

With proportional representation, there would be a greater number of minority parties. Many parties, such as the Green Party, Equality Party, Rhinoceros Party, Marijuana Party, Communist Party, Nazi Party, etc. would be able to gain representation. Although some of these Parties are true parties with solid election platforms, others are "one issue" or "no issue" parties. Are we wanting to give these Parties official status in the National Assembly?

With memories of the Equality Party, many Anglophones support proportional representation. Under this system, the Equality Party could have gained more seats than they did under the present system. The belief is that the Equality Party would be able to express and defend the interests of the Anglophone minority. Unfortunately minority parties do not get to speak that much in the National Assembly. They are always relegated to the opposition benches, and given only as much time to speak on issues as their numbers merit. There is no guarantee that anyone listens. I am really afraid of any system that would remove Anglophone representation in the mainstream Parties. We need Anglophones to participate in the Parties that will form the government. We want to be in on decisions in the formulation of policy rather than in the opposition complaining about it.

A minority party for Anglophones would be like the Bloc Québécois for Québécois. The Bloc will always be in the opposition. While claiming to represent Quebec interests, the party only voices Quebec interests after policies have been developed. In fact, their goal is to remove Québécois from the decision making process by keeping them in the opposition. Similarly, a minority party for Anglophones would remove Anglophones from the decision making within the government.

With proportional representation, there is a real danger that we will frequently have minority governments. Some suggest that this is a good thing because it forces the ruling party to form coalitions with other minority parties. However, minority governments lead to more frequent elections. Minority governments do not develop a long term plan for governing, but jump from issue to issue. Frequent changes in government leads to the civil service running the government rather than the elected reps.

The Draft Bill for Electoral Reform

The Draft Bill for Electoral Reform proposes that the province be divided into 75 divisions (plus two for Nunavik and the Îles-de-la-Madeleine) instead of the present 125. Each of these divisions would elect a representative to the National Assembly, just as they do now. Every three divisions would be grouped into electoral districts, and each district would receive an additional 2 seats. These seats would be filled based on the percentage of the vote for each Party within the district. The actual individuals chosen to fill these seats comes from a list of candidates, provided by each Party, arranged in the order of preference.

Since the size of the ridings will be increased, areas that have a significant Anglophone population will see their influence reduced. There will be fewer divisions covering the west island of Montreal, and therefore, there will be fewer representatives elected directly. The new districts will add additional representatives, but whether this is sufficient to compensate for the larger divisions depends on how the districts are organized. If a division with a large Anglophone population is grouped with two other divisions with small Anglophone populations, then their percentage may be reduced to the point where they are unable gain either of the additional two seats.

Within this system, for a minority party to win one of the district seats, it would need at least 16% of the popular vote. The Party would have to run a candidate in each of the divisions in order to gain enough support to win one of the district seats. This system would also be detrimental to independent candidates. The independent candidate would have to spend more time and money to campaign in the larger divisions and would almost certainly be ineligible for one of the district seats.

Any member elected in this system must not have the ability to change parties. Since their election has determined the right of a Party to have additional seats, they cannot be allowed to change their allegiance between elections.

The problem of strategic voting is not solved with this proposal. Voters will still not want to support minority parties for fear of splitting the vote.

These proposals in the draft bill do nothing to solve the problem that members from the divisions are being sent to the National Assembly even though they only received 40% of the vote. The two district seats makes things even worse because they are given to candidates that received even less percentage of the vote. For example, in one division, Mary get 40% of the vote, John gets 30%, Ann gets 20%, and Fred gets 10%. Mary wins a seat in the National Assembly for the division. However, Fred is a good “Party man” and his name is on the top of the list for the Party in the division. Since the Party earned one of the District seats, Fred goes to the National Assembly even though he only got 10% of the vote. The population really didn’t like either Mary or Fred. If the population could have had a second vote to decide between the top two, Mary and John, they might have picked John.

A Run-off Election

One idea for Electoral Reform that has not been given much attention is the idea of having a Run-off Election. As illustrated in the previous paragraph, there was no clear winner in the first vote. Therefore have a second vote to decide between the top contenders. Then, at least, the representative in the National Assembly will have the support of more than half of his constituents.

This is the only method that effectively deals with the problem of strategic voting. Voters can vote freely in the first round of the election. In some cases, they may find that their minority party candidate achieves more votes than the other “safe” Party candidate. In the second round voters can then make their final choice with no fear of “splitting the vote”.

It may be that the winning Party still will not have more than 50% of the vote, but at least we know that every member of the National Assembly has the support of the majority of their constituents.

The common complaint with this type of system is that the election is not completed in one day. I don’t believe that this is a great problem. After the initial time, the population would quickly adapt to the concept of a pre-election to choose the final two candidates. In divisions where the winning candidate has more than 50% of the vote in the initial election, a second election will not be necessary.

A Continuing Electoral System

We only think about elections every 4 years or so. Our electoral system should be something that should be ongoing at all times. It should be responsible for other activities such as the following

- At the time of an election, the electors feelings about the particular policies of the Parties should be polled. The electors should have a say on the individual policies rather than having to choose only the whole package presented by a Party. The

winning Party cannot claim that it automatically has a mandate from the population for everyone of its policies.

- Between elections, the electors should have a place where they can go to register their approval or disapproval for particular policies of the government.
- Between elections, the electors should have the right of recall of their representative in the National Assembly, if they believe he has violated his mandate.