

Ontario on verge of making history with electoral changes

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Electoral dysfunction. Imagine if Canada's national game were to be played under the following rules: The rink would be on a slope. The team playing downhill would be supplied with hockey sticks, and would score two goals for every time it got the puck in the net.

The other team would play uphill, without sticks, and would score only one goal every time it placed the puck in the net. Or perhaps not. Outrageous, eh?

As Larry Gordon of FairVote Canada explained at a meeting hosted by the local Green party in Swanmore Hall on Monday, it is, however, a fair metaphor for the rules at present governing our federal and provincial elections in Canada.

In 1990, the NDP formed the government with 57 per cent of the seats, but only 38 per cent of the popular vote. In 1995, the PCs formed the government with 63 per cent of the seats, but only 45 per cent of the popular vote. In 2003, the Liberals formed the government with 70 per cent of the seats, but only 47 per cent of the popular vote.

Suppose that in an election with four contestants, candidate A gets 40 per cent of the vote, candidate B gets 30 per cent, candidate C gets 20 per cent, and candidate D gets 10 per cent. Under our present rules, candidate A is elected, though 60 per cent of the electorate didn't want him. Those 60 per cent are, in effect, disenfranchised. They had the vote, took the trouble to use it, but had no say whatsoever in electing an MP who would represent their views in Parliament. Their vote was wasted.

For this reason, most developed democracies in the world have changed their election rules, choosing one form or another of proportional representation. These PR systems work to make all votes carry equal weight, and to ensure that none is wasted. They result in parliaments where the various parties are represented in numbers proportionate to the numbers of people who voted for them.

Canada is one of the few holdouts to cling to an antiquated, clearly unjust, first-past-the-post system. Ontario, however, may be on the verge of making history. The Ontario Citizens' Assembly on Electoral Reform, convened by the Ontario government, is nearing a decision on whether to recommend a new voting system for Ontario. If it does, we'll all get the chance to vote on that recommendation in a referendum in October of this year. Mark the date in your calendar - Oct. 10!

Larry Gordon regretted that an unreasonably high threshold, 60 per cent of the vote, has been set to achieve change. This is ironic since most MPPs are elected with less than 50 per cent of the vote. It is not, however, unreachable if enough of us are aware of the issue, and act on it. Whatever our party affiliation, we would all benefit from the increase in genuine democracy such a change would bring.

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