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Why Mixed Member Proportional Representation Deserves to Be at the Top: Mixed Member Proportional is the Ideal System, but Principled and Respectful Compromise Can Do the Job Too

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(Part of Policy Options’ Electoral Reform Special Feature)

The following is evidence given at the House of Commons Special Committee on Electoral Reform, on September 1, 2016:

Thank you so much, Mr. Chair. It’s good to be back. If I’d known I was coming, I’d have baked a cake, which is to say, I would have sent a paper. But I haven’t, and I’ll send one afterwards.

Just to situate you briefly, yes, I did work on this file when I was a parliamentarian. I think the culmination, in terms of what went on in Parliament, was an opposition day motion in December 2014 specifically to test the waters on not continuing with winner-take-all electoral systems, and specifically to endorse mixed member proportional representation adapted to Canada. The vote didn’t pass, but it is noteworthy to know that 16 of the 31 Liberal MPs voting that day did vote with the motion. Therefore, I think we have the basis for the cross-partisan/pan-partisan discussion that this committee is clearly all about.

Let me start by explaining in brief several reasons mixed member proportional deserves to be at the top, or at the top along with one or two other proportional models.

The standard reason you’ve all heard is that it’s the best of two worlds, which are the two principles from the committee’s mandate. They are called effectiveness and legitimacy, but effectively, it’s the fair translation of the votes-into-seats principle and the local-representation principle, which are both attended to by the model.

The second two reasons I want to point out are less commonly noted.

The first is one that I have been beating like a dead horse for the last three years, but others don't seem to talk about it as much. I think MMP takes local MPs and local candidates much more seriously than any other form of PR and more than first-past-the-post. That's because of the potential for crossover voting. Voters can tick "local representative" and vote for candidate X, who happens to be from a certain party, and then go over to the regional MP lists and decide which party they want to support, and which person on the list, if it's flexible. They don't have to be from the same party.

I think that has salutary impacts. In New Zealand, around 30% take up that option of cross-voting. It means that the local candidates are more likely to be able to attract votes for who they are, what they've done and what they can bring nationally from the local level, without having to worry about the strategic vote. I think this is an extremely important feature of MMP.

The second thing is almost heresy to say, but I think the idea of having a coterie of regional MPs alongside the purely local MP has a salutary impact on national politics. It already is taking a bunch of MPs away from the purely local. They're going to have to look a bit more broadly at the dynamics in a bigger area than a local riding. I believe, after three years on the Hill, that we have a deficit when it comes to a capacity to focus on national issues in our Parliament. It's far too localized by virtue of the system of 338 ridings set alongside each other, which somehow then has to generate a national politics. I think there would be some added benefit from MMP that way.

Some of the problems from the current system deserve to be highlighted, because I think MMP does address them, as would any serious PR system. One is the "diversity of viewpoints" problem. When you have false majorities, you have less of a true diversity of the range of voters' opinions. You have a serious problem with lack of diversity of viewpoints coming from regions. Right now Atlantic Canada is represented by an albeit fairly large-tent party, but nonetheless one party. Toronto has gone without representatives of other than one party. When the NDP swept in Quebec in 2011, we had 80% of the seats, with something like 42%, 43%, 44% of the vote. That was no fairer in our score than what's happened in many other contexts.

It exacerbates regionalism, because people tend to start associating Alberta, for example, as nothing but Conservative, especially if that repeats itself over more than one election.

It also feeds into an unduly executive-dominated Westminster system of parliament. The false majorities can give licence to that power dynamic. It can produce tunnel vision and ideological fixations in legislation, rather than forcing legislation to have to encounter the different points of view that proportional representation elections tends to produce and our false majority system doesn't.

I also believe we have a system — and it can be exacerbated in different points in time — that tends away from consensus and collegiality, and toward adversarialism and hyperpartisanship, almost a gridiron style of politics, that is tied a bit to the winner-take-all dynamic and the organizing for the next election on those same terms.

Alternative vote is a ranked ballot system within single-member districts that is on the table. The Liberal Party has put it on the table in its own policy book from some time ago...It is crucial that everybody knows there is nothing about AV that would really counteract most, if any, of these problems.

The first thing is that, although it is unpredictable, it is almost always the case that, at least to some extent, AV will exacerbate the problem of disproportionality. Éric Grenier for CBC, using available data right after the last election, suggested that something like 224 Liberals would have been elected, instead of the 185 or so who were elected under the current system.

Beyond that, even on its own terms, AV is presented as a majoritarian system. I want to make sure everybody understands the limitations of that characterization.

First of all, it's not really majoritarian in the sense of a majority of first preferences. For many of the ridings, you have to add second preferences. That's the first thing that everybody has to note.

The second thing is that it doesn't even make sense of the notion of making every vote count, which was the top line in the government's platform in the last election.

For years, we all assumed that the expression of making every vote count really referred to proportional representation. But it's clear that if it was used in the Liberal platform, it had to be meant to possibly do service to keeping open the possibility of alternative vote. However, that can't be the case when AV doesn't actually count every vote equally. It's not just that what happens is that when you count the second votes, you're only counting from the bottom up until somebody crosses the 50% threshold. You almost never get to counting the second votes of the first- and second-place candidates after the first round. It's actually a false presentation of making every vote count.

I would say that there's also a deceptive majority problem. I'll send you the chart where I've done the work on this. You can actually get candidates crossing the threshold of 50%-plus-one in the first plus second votes, while if you added up all of the first- and second-place votes, including those for the top two candidates, that candidate would not be the preference.

It's a system that has benefits, but you have to be very careful to know what they are and not falsely say this is about a majoritarian system. It's really not a majoritarian system of great consequence.

I'll end by saying that I spent three years as an official opposition critic for democratic reform, making the case for PR, and the NDP's position was MMP, which was arrived at after the NDP studied it in the early 2000s. There have been various commissions across the country including the one in New Brunswick, which was really well outlined by Mr. McLaughlin; there is the positive experience abroad in Scotland, New Zealand, and Germany, for example; there is my own review. I do believe MMP is the ideal, but I want to emphasize that principled and respectful compromise can do the job too. It's already central to your work.

I would, for example, urge this committee to consider the UK's Jenkins Commission's idea of MMP, allowing ranked ballot voting on the local election side. You'd have to make sure that you don't have a split between local and regional seats that unduly favours the local election side, because the ranked ballot could produce greater distortions at that level. But if there are folks in the room who say there's an independent benefit to ranked ballot voting for local elections, it can be built in.

Similarly, I believe you can design a single transferable vote system (STV) that would allow for a degree of local attention. You can divvy up multi-member district ridings for service functions. You can have a coordinated delivery of services, even though all the MPs represent the entire riding, and you can approximate a form of local attention with STV.

There are ways to compromise and get to multiple goals.

There are many other institutional design features that I'm happy to take questions on, but I'd end by saying that I think this committee started extremely well. [Minister Monsef](#)'s introduction talked about two mischiefs, not one. She talked about the problem of false majority. She also talked about why an alternative vote style system might address another set of problems. She wasn't exclusive, and the composition of this committee has, I think, given a jump-start to something that many doubted would ever be possible.

There are lots of folks out there, nay-sayers, commentators, who are assuming that behind the scenes — not for the members of this committee, but behind the scenes — one of the goals is for this to all end up as a big noble failure, and that there will be a deadlock, an impasse, nothing will come out of it, and we'll keep the current system. I don't think that has to happen. I have a skeptical optimism that I believe we can do much better, and I believe you're starting that because this very committee is formed in a way that proportional representation would form committees in the future. You guys can do it. It will itself be proof that a system can work like this in the future.

This article is part of the [Electoral Reform special feature](#).