

# Engaging Canadians with Proportional Representation and Evidence

by Ralph C. Martin

The Canadian Senate is due for a review. The recent spending controversies provide an opportunity to consider what we want to keep and what can serve us better.

The Senate does guarantee some balance of regional representation, federally. It also has a reputation for excellent committee work to alert Canadians. For example, Senator Herbert Sparrow chaired the Senate's agriculture committee (1980-84), and his report on the state of Canada's soils, "*Soil at Risk: Canada's Eroding Future*" still stands today as a clarion call to manage our soils as if we intend to retain their productive capacity.

Although the Senate, as a body of sober second thought, may have been appropriate in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, there is less reason to think we need this patronizing approach today, especially since members are not elected. To the extent that the Senate is a repository of party ideology and inertia, member's thoughts tend to be neither sober nor second.

Many European democracies have an element of proportional representation to give more gravitas to the votes of those who want to support a given party, even if their candidate may not be first past their riding's post. In Canada, we could introduce proportional representation without additional cost.

Let's suppose that the 105 seats in the Canadian Senate were reassigned to the House of Commons as 100 seats with the same relative representation from regions. They might be called proportional representation (PR) seats. Prior to an election, each party would be required to name their PR candidates in the order that they would be designated to represent their party, in each region of Canada. All voters would be aware who would serve as PR members depending on the success of the party's popular vote.

In a possible scenario, the result of the next election, expected in 2015, might allocate the total of 338 traditional House of Commons seats to political parties such that the Conservatives win 119 seats, the Liberals 118, the NDP 94, the BQ 4 and the Greens 3. However, each party would also be assigned 100 PR seats. If the popular vote is 30% for the Conservatives, 34% for the Liberals, 26% for the NDP, 2% for the BQ and 8% for

the Greens, then the final distribution of the new total of 438 seats would be 149 for the Conservatives, 152 for the Liberals, 120 for the NDP, 6 for the BQ and 11 for the Greens.

As a proviso, after the election, the party with the most PR votes, in this scenario, the Liberals, could select PR members from any region of the country although of course no more in one region, than the PR seats assigned to that region. No doubt they would consider where they need to strengthen their representation in Canada. The party with the next highest popular vote can then select their PR members next and so on until the party with the lowest popular vote selects members from the region(s) for which allocations remain.

Surely we are mature enough as a democracy to negotiate alliances based on electoral results and parties should be expected to use these results as a basis to govern for all Canadians. We are known internationally as compromisers and the time has come to exercise this capacity at home and rise above the winner-takes-all approach.

With this model, there is also an opportunity to strengthen the committee work of Parliamentarians. In our complex world, the challenges of climate change, decreasing biodiversity, poverty, lack of employment and food insecurity should be addressed with evidence based on the best current understanding from science, business, the humanities, the arts and spiritual insights. Parliamentary committees, constituted according to the popular vote, could be charged to gather such evidence by calling well informed witnesses and to provide recommendations for each bill, to which their research pertains.

The onus should be on members in the House of Commons during readings of these bills to suggest amendments based on the evidence presented, or new evidence which pertains to the bills. The Speaker could develop protocols for evidence based debate, as could Chairs of each Committee.

The challenges facing us will be most effectively met by governance models which facilitate appropriate representation and evidence, and thus the engagement of House of Common members and our entire Canadian populace.

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