

Report on the Fair Vote Canada Future Directions Conference June 13, 2009 – Ottawa

Fair Vote Canada hosted a one-day conference in Ottawa to allow FVC members and supporters to: 1) share information on the state of the Canadian electoral reform movement, and 2) have an open-ended discussion on future strategy and tactics.

Approximately 70 people attended the conference and more than 200 provided advance input through an online survey. The conference also had a real-time audio webcast and a Twitter feed that was projected on the conference room screen.

The day after the conference, the member-elected National Council of Fair Vote Canada met to discuss the feedback and begin work on a new strategic plan and programs for launch in Fall 2009 – stay tuned for further details and opportunities to engage in the process!

The following report consolidates notes provided by presenters and discussion leaders at the June 13 Future Directions Conference.

Session 1: Lessons We Have Learned

June Macdonald, former president, Fair Vote Ontario

Lessons from the 2007 Ontario referendum

- Politicians who benefit from the status quo won't support reform.
- The Ontario media were very negative.
- Dr. Fred Cutler's research indicated an informed public would have supported reform, but educating 12 million citizens on electoral reform is an expensive and complex proposition.
- What might have changed the Ontario referendum result:
 - The Citizens' Assembly process starting much earlier to give more time for public education;
 - A government that supported the reform process with the premier and MPPs putting a spotlight on the process and supporting extensive public education;
 - Media that actively supported a public engagement and education process.

Wendy Bergerud, Fair Voting BC

Lessons from the BC referendums

- In 2005, the Citizens' Assembly had more public attention and the ballot question was yes/no on the Assembly's recommendation. In 2009, the ballot question asked voters to choose between FPTP and STV.
- The government funded a campaign for each side, but let the FPTP side call itself No-STV rather than label itself as pro-FPTP.
- There was less public anger at the government and more concern about economic instability in 2009 than in 2005.
- The \$500,000 provided to each side in the referendum is not enough to educate millions of people.
- The BC campaign had too much of a do-it-yourself attitude rather than hiring campaign experts.
- We need to find better ways of communicating the message – be less academic.

Mercédeez Reberge, Mouvement pour une démocratie nouvelle (MDN)

Lessons from Quebec

- Since 2002, both the Quebec Liberals and PQ have taken steps on electoral reform, but both subsequently stopped their reform programs claiming there is "no consensus".
- Feedback to the Liberal government on a proposed MMP system was very supportive of implementing MMP, but with significant changes to the government's proposal (e.g., having two votes rather than one, and using province-wide proportionality)
- The Quebec chief electoral officer, after reviewing the issue, proposed an MMP system with two votes and regional lists.
- MDN is focused on trying to get a bill introduced in 2010 for use in the 2011 elections. MDN sees no need for more public consultation since previous governments have consulted extensively.

Mark Greenan, former campaign manager, PEI MMP campaign

Lessons from the PEI referendum

- The 2006 PEI referendum was the only referendum not held in conjunction with a provincial election and turnout was very low.
- Holding a referendum outside an election allows major parties who oppose reform to mobilize their supporters to stop reform.

- Five lessons:
 - The public is very ill-informed about how government and voting systems work.
 - Opponents will say anything to stop reform.
 - The media will not focus on the shortcomings of FPTP, but instead focus on the “complexity” of the PR alternatives.
 - Winning a referendum is very hard, particularly with a 60% threshold.
 - The fair voting movement has to get more “political”: expand the mandate and activities to include other democratic reforms, partner with other organizations, consider starting a registered charity for public education work, and strengthen the financial base by increasing the number of monthly donors.

Brian Gibb and Patrick Daoust, L’Association pour la Revendication des Droits Démocratique (ARDD)

Update on the Quebec charter challenge

- The Quebec charter challenge is proceeding to the appeals court after losing at the Quebec Superior Court. The appeal is likely to be heard this winter.
- The case is focused on showing that FPTP violates sections 3 and 5 of the Charter.
- Regardless of the appeal outcome, the case is expected to go to the Supreme Court, where it will have the best chance of success due to other rulings on effective representation and meaningful political participation.
- If the court rules in favour of the challenge, governments would have to discontinue using FPTP, but that does not ensure PR would replace it, as there are a variety of alternative systems.

Comments from the floor on “lessons learned”

- The first priority should be a referendum on the need for reform, rather than a vote on a specific alternative.
- Campaigns need to be run by experienced professionals.
- The fair voting movement needs to be ten times larger to have clout.
- We need to tap into immigrant communities where people are familiar with other voting systems.
- FVC chapters need to be active between referendums and elections.

- Closed list and provincewide list systems won't gain wide support.
- Workshops should be done allowing people to use alternative systems.
- We need to help people understand why AV is just another winner-take-all system.
- We should partner with schools on student education.
- FVC should look at a new governance structure to involve all regions.
- The internet may be our only affordable channel for outreach.
- In both New Zealand and Scotland the details of the MMP models were designed by experts. In BC and Ontario, the citizens' assemblies had little time to deal with detailed design issues.

Session 2: Strategic Direction: On Track or Time to Adjust?

Barbara Odenwald, President, Fair Vote Canada

- FVC needs to change, but not radically.
- We should be a source of electoral system expertise.
- The reform process we have been promoting is not working because in the short term we cannot educate the entire public.
- We have to think longer-term, be patient and make better use of the internet and partnerships with others.
- We need to build better relationships with individual journalists.
- We need to work more closely with members of our National Advisory Board.
- A decentralized approach may be best: let local chapters work on whatever projects they feel are best to reach local people.
- FVC needs to provide education and campaign tools to local organizers.
- Internally, FVC National Council members should have individual portfolios and be responsible for those areas.

Larry Gordon, Executive Director, Fair Vote Canada

- After several referendum losses, we have a more challenging environment because political elites and the media will frame electoral reform as a dead issue.
- FVC has to find a way to significantly grow its base of members, donors and supporters.
- Whether we want it or not, we will likely have a referendum process for reform – either to enable the process and/or to ratify a final decision. If we need a referendum to initiate the process, we should push for a simple question on whether Canadians want electoral reform.
- We need to educate more people by expanding our electoral reform work into civil society, working with people to understand and improve the voting systems in NGOs, co-ops, unions and universities.
- We need new ways to connect with people and engage them in democratic reform discussions, so FVC should consider tackling a few related issues.
- These new issues should 1) relate to creating stronger democratic representation, and 2) be issues that people can talk about at Tim Horton's – i.e., obvious problems that have easy-to-explain solutions.
- Examples for consideration: 1) ban attack ads or boycott parties that use them, 2) ban floor-crossing, 3) put an end to the unelected Senate by having a referendum on whether to abolish or elect the Senate, 4) change the ballot-triggered \$1.75 annual party subsidy to a voter-directed annual subsidy triggered through a tax return check-off.

Sean Geobey, National Council, Fair Vote Canada

- The fair voting movement has major opportunities in civil society.
- University student union elections offer a great opportunity to reach thousands of students and give them experience with fair voting systems.
- Wilfred Laurier University will be the first university to use STV to elect its student government.
- FVC and its chapters could work with national and local university student organizations to institute STV and other fair voting systems.
- These projects also give FVC chapters an opportunity to score victories outside of the traditional political arena, which builds momentum and morale.
- FVC should explore the possibilities for outside funding for this purpose.

Dave Meslin, FVC Toronto Chapter executive

- Most Canadians don't understand the current system, let alone the alternatives, so we have a major public education challenge.
- The municipal arena may be an area where fair voting breakthroughs are possible.
- Many municipalities suffer because of poor quality candidates and councillors.
- In Toronto, the city council is highly unrepresentative – in a highly diverse city, there is virtually no diversity at the Council.
- Some municipal reformers will press for AV rather than STV as an electoral reform measure, and that conflict will need to be addressed.

Online Survey Results

More than 200 members and non-members completed an online survey on Future Directions for the Fair Voting Movement.

The survey results were summarized and presented at the conference. [That presentation is available here.](#)

Breakout Groups: Three Questions

The following summaries were provided by discussion group leaders.

Q1: Should FVC expand our mandate to other areas of democratic reform?

Three themes emerged in the discussion groups.

1) Yes, but exercise caution

- Could get confusing, unfocused or diluted.
- Could trigger more internal debates (like MMP vs STV).
- Seek items with easy consensus, like municipal reform.
- Use the 'loss leader' concept – campaigns that will attract new members and supporters.

- Need to keep educating between election periods..
- 2) If we expand the mandate, keep voting reform as a focus and primary goal
- Some campaign ideas keep us on message (attack ads, floor crossing), while others take us off-message (Senate?)
 - We need to go deeper into voting reform, not divert from it. Refine the message.
 - Take advantage of opportunities (e.g., unstable minority federal governments, Senate reform, etc.)
 - Proposed campaigns: finance reform, broken promises, democratize party nomination processes, encourage or facilitate a more sophisticated culture of parliamentary collaboration, unite backbenchers into a Parliamentary revolt.
- 3) Expanding the mandate through a collaborative approach
- Don't divert resources - rather collaborate with other groups.
 - Create a larger umbrella that brings other groups together (Democracy Watch, Electoral Reform Canada, Equal Voice).
 - One National Council member should have a portfolio related to outreach to other groups.

Q2: Where are the opportunities for electoral reform advancement?

Among the points made by participants:

- Promote STV for Senate elections or find other ways to work with the Conservatives. FVC should meet with Minister Stephen Fletcher.
- FVC has to be ready for change opportunities, because FPTP will continue to produce bad results and problems (e.g., UK situation).
- Grassroots supporters have to be provided with the tools to act when opportunities arise.
- Student union elections and municipal reforms are good opportunities to show how PR works.
- By-elections provide opportunities; should we try electing a Fair Vote MP?
- Challenge the 60% threshold for referendum success.

- Federally – a lot of opportunities will arise. Prepare with outreach to minorities, emphasize problems with ineffective government, and the regionalization/fractionalization from FPTP.
- Campaign during elections but also right after elections.
- PR is just one part of the system – opportunities can happen by pushing for other reforms; campaign against attack ads, floor crossing.
- Campaign finance – rather than have the vote trigger the \$1.75, have another place on the ballot to indicate which party gets the \$1.75.
- We need to focus on growing Fair Vote Canada.
- An enhanced website and other internet tools are self-sustaining outreach.
- The Quebec court challenge provides a great opportunity.
- FVC could promote hybrid voting systems.
- We need online demonstrations of fair voting systems.
- Declining voter turnout is creating opportunity for reform.

Q3: What level of government offers the best opportunity for reform?

Summary: one discussion group thought municipal reform should be the main focus; another concluded FVC should stay focused on federal reform; and another supported a mixed federal and municipal focus.

- The federal level should come first since we have a limited amount of energy. That is where we have the most voters and can have the greatest impact. Also we will have many opportunities since unstable minority governments are now endemic.
- Those arguing for a municipal focus said we need a win. Since there is no action provincially, local politics may draw new supporters out of the woodwork. Vancouver and Victoria already have at-large municipal councils which are more adaptable to an STV conversion. Toronto could also be a good focus for activity. One issue for Ontario, and probably other provinces, is that any municipal reform would require acceptance by the province.
- A discussion group with numerous francophones noted that the Bloc might not get behind a federal change if it was not preceded by provincial change. They also suggested that FVC pay more attention to translation on the website and in meetings

such as this one. They suggested that a Bloc member be added to the FVC Advisory Board.

Self-Selected Discussion Groups

In the last session, participants were invited to self-select into discussion groups to tackle any subject they wished. Several groups submitted brief reports on their discussions.

Charter Challenge

- Although there are no referendums on the horizon, the court case could present major events around which to mobilize opinion. While an ultimate trip to the Supreme Court may be some time off, every time the case is heard in court or a ruling comes down is a tremendous opportunity to communicate the message and build momentum.
- The plaintiffs would like to see Fair Vote really take ownership and back the case.
- There is a need for a strong communications plan and a larger team to support the four plaintiffs. Brian Gibb will plan a meeting in the National Capital Region to discuss these issues.

Strategy for the Next Federal Election

- We need two complementary strategies: 1) one for the period before the next federal election, preferably before the writ comes down; 2) another for the week after the election when the causes of yet another skewed election result is on voters' minds.
- *The before strategy* suggested by Henry Milner was to focus on bringing together the arguments for coalition government that were debated at the time of Harper's economic statement and supported by 100 political scientists. MPs who actively supported the coalition idea should be identified.
- *The post election strategy* put forward by Vicki Robinson focused on having a ready-to-go media and speaking strategy (all communication media) for the post election week. That is the time to capitalise on voter dismay at the outcome of election of yet another minority government. This strategy would include lining up 'name' writers/pundits to comment on the reasons for the outcome and the implications. In addition, letters and statements should be ready for use with the traditional and online media (including Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, etc.). This advance readiness strategy would also be beneficial for unforeseen opportunities, such as the 'coalition crisis' or the current UK scandals, when suddenly the electorate is interested and engaged.

- In order to put this strategy into effect, FVC would need: 1) a campaign website linked to FVC, and 2) a working group in place now to develop both the before and after strategy.

Improving the Web Site

- Why do we have a web site? 1) educate non-political geeks, 2) facilitate organizing (including toolkits and documents for chapters), 3) recruitment of members, 4) archives of past campaigns.
- How do we get to it? Three participants said that they minimize their promotion of the site because of bad design and clutter. A simple uncluttered design with some changing content (e.g., news, teaser, cartoon) was suggested.
- Specific content suggested for the current or future web site: 1) a tool to simulate elections, 2) a link to Paypal to quickly get donations.

Forming a Fair Vote Political Party

- The discussion was lively and the upshot was: it would not be in our interest or would be more trouble than it would be worth.
- However, it was suggested we should register the Fair Vote Party name just in case we decide that this might be a route to take in future; and that someone should talk to those who have started special interest parties about the process and their experience.

Civil Disobedience

(submitted by discussion chair Matthew Aequitus)

- I proposed the topic of civil disobedience and facilitated a discussion on the subject at the end of the conference. I began by expressing concern at how there seemed little in the way of action that could be taken directly against the existing FPTP system. Networking, public education, lobbying, etc. in between elections, but during elections—the focus of FVC’s purpose—one can merely express frustration at the widespread exclusion that takes place.
- The issue of electoral reform is not an impersonal, procedural matter—it is fundamental to democratic legitimacy. Accordingly, and consistent with recent Charter challenges, I see the issue as a matter of law—not as expressing preference for a particular policy, but requesting the right of democratic inclusion for what has become a majority of the population. Not for these votes to result in power, but mere representation. The issue should be treated as the outrage that it is, and existing lobbying and pleading has not been disruptive enough to affect the system and convey that outrage.

- I spoke of how during the last election I left a polling station with my ballot, in violation of the Elections Act, and immediately mailed it to the Supreme Court. The Supreme Court responded and forwarded it to the Commissioner of Canada Elections, which took no action.
- I said how during the next election I would go to a polling station and upon receiving my ballot make a polite announcement to voters present about how the majority of votes count for nothing and that the system is inconsistent with the Charter, rip up my ballot and call the police and refuse to leave until they arrive. I viewed an overt violation of an unjust system as an expedient means of delegitimizing it in the minds of the public and the law.
- One participant in the discussion described his actions during the previous Ontario referendum, where he pointed out that they could decline their ballots if they agreed that the system needed to change, but not to MMP (given that they indeed made the effort to come out and vote). Thousands of people did this, more than what would have been expected regularly.
- He went on to talk about how in jurisdictions other than Ontario, where declined ballots are not a part of the electoral vocabulary, he observed that the idea had been suggested of a grassroots, organized movement to make a particular, distinctive mark on ballots that, which if you could get them counted separately, could be used to speak forcefully in favour of electoral reform -- i.e. to indicate a large percentage of the population felt that the system needed to change. He pointed out that getting those spoiled ballots to be counted separately might be quite difficult and would not be as sure a thing as a declined ballot.

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