



The Case for Proportional Representation (PR): a response to the Globe and Mail editorial series

**by Wayne Smith,
President, Fair Vote Canada**

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From May 2 - 5, 2005, the Globe and Mail published an historic series of four editorials in which they proposed adding an element of proportional representation to our Canadian voting system. This unprecedented editorial series provides further evidence that electoral reform and proportional representation are rapidly moving up the list of national priorities.

Fair Vote Canada commends the Globe editorial department for joining the debate on fair voting. However, we found points of both agreement and disagreement in the series. The following commentary highlights these points.

May 2, 2005 Editorial: The Case for PR: If It's Broken, Fix It

The first editorial provided an excellent outline of the shortcomings of our current voting system.

The article outlined the progress toward voting reform that is taking place in five provinces and at the federal level, and it summarized the arguments for voting reform as laid out by the report of the Law Commission of Canada:

"The current first-past-the-post system not only disproportionately rewards parties that win a plurality of votes, but triggers a series of ills. It lets the governing party use its swollen legislative majority to dominate the political agenda. It aggravates regional divisions by promoting regional parties. It denies large areas of the country adequate representation within the governing party. And it alienates those voters, usually a majority, who preferred alternative outcomes."

"Our current first-past-the-post system has grave failings," the Globe said, "It is time to change it."

We couldn't agree more.

May 3, 2005 Editorial: The Case for PR (2): B.C.'s Lasting Choice

Unfortunately, the second editorial in the series was taken up with an unduly harsh assessment of BC-STV, the proportional voting system proposal on which British Columbians will vote in a referendum on May 17, 2005.

While many other provinces are considering variations of Mixed Member Proportional (MMP) systems, the Single Transferable Vote (STV) system proposed for BC would also be a powerful tool for putting power in the hands of voters, producing more representative parliaments, and making political parties more accountable to the electorate.

In March 2005, Fair Vote Canada published a detailed critique of BC-STV and the various MMP systems proposed in other provinces. This report is available at www.fairvotecanada.org/fvc/Publications under FVC Resource Materials: "[*Proportional Representation in British Columbia, New Brunswick, Prince Edward Island and Quebec: Assessments and Recommendations on Proposed Systems in Four Provinces.*](#)"

Under the STV system, voters can rank candidates within the party they support, or even across party lines. As this would require candidates in the same party to compete with one another as well as with those in other parties, the Globe played up fears that this would "hobble government", because independent minded candidates and MPs would make it difficult for parties to present and act on a coherent platform.

But experience with STV in Ireland and other places shows that, although politics under STV is sometimes criticized for being too focused on local issues and personalities, these jurisdictions are able to maintain strong, party-based government.

These arguments would be better applied to our current winner-take-all system. What better system could be imagined for putting local concerns ahead of national and provincial ones, and encouraging pork-barrel politics, than giving each elected member his own private little fiefdom and allowing people to vote only for a local member without being able to express a preference for a party or a leader?

While the STV concept is straightforward—voters in a district electing five MPs will be able to elect the five most popular candidates—the Globe focused on the complexity of the STV system of transferring votes so that each voter gains maximum value for their choices.

But STV is not difficult to use—only to explain. Voters rank candidates, 1, 2, 3. The vote-transfer math is undeniably complicated, and therefore the system is difficult to market to those who have never experienced other voting systems. That, however, is not an argument for sticking with the antiquated and obsolete first-past-the-post voting system. Voters in Ireland and Australia have no difficulty with STV, and there is no reason to think that BC voters would be unable to do as well.

The argument about which proportional system is best is, frankly, a huge red herring. Both STV and MMP systems can be designed well or badly, as shown in Fair Vote Canada's recent evaluations of voting reform proposals in four provinces, mentioned above. In any case, any proportional system is vastly better than the first-past-the-post system we have now, a system in which sometimes the party with the most votes loses the election (BC 1996, Quebec 1998, federal election 1979)!

May 4, 2005 Editorial: The Case for PR (3): Why Mixed Is Best

The final two editorials in the series laid out the Globe and Mail's proposal for a new voting system for Canada. They were much impressed by the Law Commission of Canada's recommendation for a House of Commons consisting of two-thirds single-member ridings, and one-third party list members, and this is what they propose as well.

However, the Globe model differs from the Law Commission's model in two important respects, and compares badly in both.

First, although the Law Commission has suggested provincial lists, the Globe recommends regional lists. They have grouped the prairie provinces together into one region, and the Atlantic provinces into another. Leaving aside local political and historical concerns, and however much sense this may make from the point of view of getting good proportionality, it would require a change to the Canadian constitution, which can be very difficult and might even present an insurmountable obstacle to change. The constitution contains a formula that allocates members of Parliament to provinces, and riding boundaries that cross provincial boundaries are not permitted.

However, the major problem with the Globe's model is that, unlike the Law Commission's model, it does not use the list seats to correct and compensate for the distortions in representation caused by first-past-the-post elections in single-member ridings. The list seats are allocated according to the party vote without reference to the results in the ridings. This is not a Mixed Member Proportional system (as they incorrectly label their proposal), and indeed it is not a proportional voting system at all. It is what political scientists would call a 'parallel' system, and it would be considered only semi-proportional.

The Globe has done this deliberately so that their system will still generate single-party 'majority' governments without majority voter support, which they claim are necessary for strong, stable government. Of course, experience in Germany, Switzerland, Sweden, Norway, Holland, and the other 70 modern democracies which use proportional voting systems, shows that these countries do not need phony-majority single-party governments to have strong, stable, and effective government, nor do they degenerate into minority-government chaos. Instead, they tend to have stable coalition governments with true majority support from the voters.

This can be seen in New Zealand, where they changed from a first-past-the-post system to a Mixed Member Proportional (MMP) system in 1993. After three elections under the MMP system, New Zealand has made the transition to coalition government. When the government loses popularity, the coalition falls apart and the voters get to elect a new parliament, unlike Canada, where, the lower the government falls in the polls, the less likely they are to call an election.

May 5, 2005 Editorial: The Case for PR (4): What Might Have Been

But the Globe has added its voice to those saying it's time to scrap first-past-the-post

voting, and has noted that an element of proportionality would be helpful. The Globe's model points in the right direction, but falls short of the mark.

This is most easily illustrated by adding to the chart appearing in their last editorial. The Globe's chart showed seats won in recent elections and what would have occurred under their system, if voting patterns had been the same.

(Important note: in reality, voting patterns, party behaviour, and the list of competitive parties would be somewhat different under different systems, particularly in those systems where every vote counts.)

The following chart illustrates the differences in outcomes between our current first-past-the-post system (properly known as Single Member Plurality – SMP), the semi-proportional system proposed by the Globe (which we will call Mixed Member Majoritarian - MMM), and a true mixed proportional system (Mixed Member Proportional – MMP), assuming votes had been cast the same way under each system.

Party	2004			2000		
	SMP	MMM	MMP	SMP	MMM	MMP
Liberal	135	129	114	172	157	125
Conservative	99	99	92	N/A	N/A	N/A
C.A./Reform	N/A	N/A	N/A	66	71	77
Bloc	54	49	39	38	35	31
NDP	19	29	49	13	18	27
P.C	N/A	N/A	N/A	12	20	39
Green	0	1	13	0	0	2
Independent	1	1	1	0	0	0
Total	308	308	308	301	301	301

Party	1997			1993		
	SMP	MMM	MMP	SMP	MMM	MMP
Liberal	155	143	117	177	161	126
Conservative	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
C.A./Reform	60	60	59	52	53	57
Bloc	44	39	33	54	48	41
NDP	21	25	34	9	12	21
P.C	20	33	57	2	20	49
Green	0	0	0	0	0	0
Independent	1	1	1	1	1	1
Total	301	301	301	295	295	295

As the chart illustrates, the Globe's MMM system helps shift results in the right direction, but falls far short of what MMP would do in terms of making every vote count and creating a Parliament more reflective of the entire electorate.

In summary, despite the shortcomings of the Globe's model voting system, they have made a compelling case for changing the Canadian voting system to make it more

proportional. This series of editorials will do a lot to raise awareness among readers of the Globe across Canada of the flaws in our current voting system and the need for change, and to inform people of the tremendous movement for change which is abroad in the land.

The Globe and Mail is to be thanked and congratulated for this important contribution to the voting reform discussion in Canada.

Fair Vote Canada

26 Maryland Blvd., Toronto, ON M4C 5C9

www.fairvote.ca info@fairvotecanada.org

Phone: 416-410-4034 Fax: 416-686-4929