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# LETTERS

## Traditional voting system out of tune with the times

By CHRISTOPHER MAJKA  
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"Oh, Danny boy ... the pipes, the pipes are calling." You, who normally sing such insightful songs of politics: Where did you get such a tin ear when it comes to proportional representation? (Re: "Politics, not voting rules, in need of change," Dan Leger, Oct. 27 column.) Danny,

remember a concept that our country is built upon called "democracy"? Much ink has been spilled about this, but one of the two fundamental principles of democracy, embraced since the idea first took root in the sixth century BC, is that all members of society have equal access to, and share equally in, the governance of the state (the other is that all members enjoy universally recognized freedoms and liberties). This has come to mean both "one woman/man, one vote" and that all votes should be created equal. In other words, everyone's franchise should have equal weight and everyone's views deserve a place at the democratic table. "First past the post" is not one of the bedrock principles of democracy, either in ancient Athens or in most of the contemporary world.

I apologize for this detour into political philosophy, but I think it's important to pause and focus on core principles – in other words, to do what's fundamentally and democratically right.

In the last election, 941,097 Canadians (6.8 per cent of voters) voted for the Green Party. These citizens have no political representation in Ottawa. Their votes are effectively worthless in Parliament, the place in our nation where governance is made and power is allocated. Another 2,509,148 people (18.13 per cent of voters) cast their ballots for the NDP, resulting in 37 seats; while 1,379,956 (9.97 per cent) endorsed the Bloc Québécois, resulting in 49 seats. Do some simple math and you'll see it took 28,162 BQ supporters to elect a BQ MP, while 67,815 NDP supporters were needed to elect an NDP MP – almost two and a half times the number. Only 36,416 supporters were needed to elect a Conservative MP, while it took 47,121 Liberals to elect one.

Can this be fair? Can it possibly be democratic? Citizens are left unrepresented, or the numbers are so skewed that my vote may only be worth 40 per cent of yours. Every kind of partisan politicking aside, this system simply doesn't reflect the core values of democracy.

Not only does "first past the post" fundamentally corrupt the democratic process, it also distorts every possible dimension of political representation and analysis. While the Conservatives increased their popular vote from 2006 by only 1.3 per cent, they hold 19 more seats – a 6.2 per cent increase.

You say that support for proportional representation comes from political parties that can't win "using the traditional Canadian voting system." Traditional? How exactly does "tradition" factor into mechanisms of selecting a fair and effective government, that can unite and represent the interests of all Canadians in a 21st century rife with economic uncertainty? A country facing environmental problems that challenge the very fabric of our society, if not of the world itself. Twenty per cent of our aging populace can't find a family physician. Isn't it time we considered setting "traditional" electoral systems aside?

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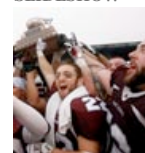
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- [Voice of the people \(2008-11-10\)](#)
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- [Voice of the people \(2008-11-09\)](#)
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- [I remember Johnny \(2008-11-08\)](#)
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How about asking for a fair voting system? How about a democratic one? Or an effective one? If 37.6 per cent of Canadians support the Conservatives, what's wrong with having that percentage reflected in Parliament? If 6.8 per cent of Canadians believe the Green Party best represents their views and interests, what's wrong with giving those people a parliamentary voice? If 18 per cent of Canadians support the NDP, isn't there a problem assigning them only 12 per cent of parliamentary seats? Is it good for Canadian democracy that the BQ, who hold 16 per cent of the seats in Parliament, are supported by only 10 per cent of the electorate? Can anyone believe that these skewed proportions will lead to a government in which all Canadians are fairly enfranchised? Is it any wonder that historically low numbers of people (particularly youth) bothered to vote at all in this last election, given the wildly illogical electoral system and the borderline nonsensical results it produces? The solution isn't brain surgery. Most democratic societies now use electoral systems of proportional representation (PR).

Virtually every nation in Europe uses PR, as do New Zealand, South Africa, many countries in South America, etc. Why? Because it's both fair and effective. If people from Austria to Venezuela "get it," are Canadians incapable? I doubt it. Experience in a plethora of countries shows the PR systems lead to better governance in which parties must form coalitions, sit down with political rivals, hammer out deals, make compromises, and come to consensus decisions. Decisions that not only reflect the full spectrum of society, but ones in which everyone has a stake. Why? Because everyone's voice has been heard around the parliamentary table. Do Canadians deserve less? I don't think so.

Will it cure all of our political problems? I sincerely doubt it, but there's absolutely no doubt that it would be a major improvement on the political stagnation that Canada is mired in. "First past the post" was a problem when there were three parties. Now there are five major players around the table and the electoral system has transformed into what the Winnipeg Free Press has called a "toxic voting system" that "turns elections into a wild craphshoot." Vote-splitting is causing absurd outcomes where the majority of elected MPs are nominally opposed by more voters in their ridings than elect them. Isn't it worth improving on this?

First past the post? Traditional Canadian voting systems? "And I am dead, as dead I well may be" go the traditional lyrics of an Irish ballad you may recall. Danny? Do ye hear the pipes a calling?

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- Sports
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- Travel
- Books
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- Science
- The Nova Scotian
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- Community News
- NS Communities

- OPINIONS**
- Editorials
- Columnists
- News Columns
- Business Columns
- Sports Columns
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