

Bill Rea ? Ranked ballots are the way to go

An interesting item appeared in the vast assortment of emails I received at the office last week.

It was from the Broadbent Institute, and it dealt with the way Canadians elect their federal governments.

The Broadbent Institute bills itself as ?an independent, non-partisan organization championing progressive change through the promotion of democracy, equality, and sustainability and the training of a new generation of leaders.?

The Institute is calling for changes to the way things are currently done, and calling on Prime Minister Justin Trudeau and his new majority government to keep the promise to change things.

The idea of changing the way elections are conducted at the federal level did come up during the recent campaign. There's always room for change, especially if it also means improvement.

I have been of the belief for some time that the current system, commonly known as ?first past the post,? does not serve Canadians well. I agree there is a problem with the fact that Trudeau and his Liberals fell a little short of getting 40 per cent of the popular vote Oct. 19, yet they got 54.4 per cent of the seats in the House of Commons, meaning they have a majority with about 15 seats to spare. That also means Trudeau can do pretty much as he pleases for the next four years, even though the majority of Canadians who went to the polls voted for someone else.

According to the media release from the Broadbent Institute, most Canadians agree that a change is needed.

The Institute commissioned a national survey last month by Abacus Data. It polled 2,986 Canadians (roughly averaging nine people per riding).

The results showed a lot of support for proportional representation, and not a lot of support for ranked ballots (also sometimes known as weighted or preferential ballots).

The way ranked ballots work is people who are going in to vote in an election would mark their first choice, as well as second and third choice.

We'll hypothetically say there are five candidates seeking to be MP in a certain riding, and work on the assumption that none of the five emerge with 50 per cent of the vote, meaning no clear majority. The candidate who's bringing up the rear would be tossed from the running, and the second-choice votes on that person's ballots would be doled out accordingly to the remaining candidates. If there's still no contender with a clear majority, then the person in fourth place would be removed from race, with the second choices on that person's ballots being distributed, along with the third choices on the first person who got bumped from the field. Eventually, under this concept, someone has to come up with a clear majority.

The media release stated that Abacus Data ?estimates? that had ranked ballots been used in the October election, the Conservatives would have only won 66 seats, instead of the 99 they actually did win, while the Liberals would have realized an additional 33 seats, thus adding substantially to their majority. The NDP, according to these ?estimates? would have gained an additional six seats, while the Bloc Quebecois would have dropped six. And Elizabeth May would still be leading a caucus of one, wondering who would second motions to adjourn caucus meetings.

I firmly believe the current system needs to be changed. One of the main reasons is the perception, shared by many people, that MPs (MPPs for that matter too) are no longer the people's representatives in government, but they are the government's representatives to the people.

There is a general assumption that MPs are governed by party discipline. They are expected to follow the line that has been set upstairs, and woe betide the MP who deviates from that. Stephen Harper had little tolerance for such things, as people like Garth Turner (the finest MP I ever covered) learned the hard way. To the best of my knowledge, Turner's constituents in Halton were never given a satisfactory explanation as to why their duly elected MP was bounced from the Tory caucus in 2006.

I agree with the view that we need a system that allows MPs to be more independent, rather than have them follow the marching orders of some unelected joker working in the Prime Minister's Office (PMO).

The Broadbent Institute is evidently in the group that believes proportional representation is the way to address that situation. I am of the belief that proportional representation is a great way to make things worse.

Since Trudeau's Liberals collected almost 40 per cent of the votes in the recent election, under proportional representation, the Liberals would get almost 40 per cent of the seats in the House of Commons (135, according to my calculations). And who would decide who occupies those seats? Trudeau might have a hand in the process, but reality tells me he would more or less rubber stamp the recommendations made by his underlings in the PMO. And who are they going to answer to? The voters they are expected to serve, or the party leadership that gave them their jobs with the lush pay cheques that go with it?

Under weighted ballots, it would be the voters who would make the decision, contrary to the nonsense that Smith has spewed out.

There have been times when I went into the voting booth knowing the candidate I favoured didn't have a hope of winning. That's okay. That's the way things go in a democracy. But under the current system, all of us get one and only one shot at deciding who represents us. With ranked ballots, we get extra shots at it. We would all get the chance to pick the candidate we really want, but also the next best one, and the one after that.

We the voters would get to decide the issue, not ?skew? it, as Smith would suggest.

It's no secret that I am an advocate of ranked ballots. I have written to that effect many times, and will probably do so again.

Because, unlike proportional representation, it's actually the voters who get to make the final call, not the party hierarchies.

Would someone at the Broadbent Institute kindly explain to me what in blazes is wrong with that.

