Bill Rea ? Still believe in ranked ballots

One of the nice things about being a human being is we get to change our minds now and then.

Most of us avail ourselves of this ability, sometimes much to the frustration of those around us (ask my wife if you don't believe me).

And even if we don't change our minds, it's always good to rethink ideas. Sometimes we have good reason to change our way of thinking on a certain issue, and others it confirms, at least in our own minds, the correctness of the positions we have been holding. I'm in the middle of such a rethink, in light of the recent electoral reform panel discussion, which was hosted by the Dufferin-Caledon Federal Liberal Riding Association.

The session dealt mainly with a debate on the merits of various ways to cast ballots at election time, and to have them counted. The main options were proportional representation, weighed or ranked ballots and the status quo.

Those of you who are familiar with what I have written in the past on this subject know that long have advocated for ranked ballots (also sometimes known as preferential ballots). So the recent meeting prompted me to do some thinking. It didn't make me change my mind, you understand, but it was cause for thought.

Dr. Barry Kay, associate professor of political science at Wilfrid Laurier University, spoke in favour of ranked ballots, but he pointed out one possible flaw (which I confess had never occurred to me). It would favour the Liberals more than any other party, and speaking as one who generally votes Conservative, that's a bit of a bother. I have sometimes voted Liberal, and once even voted Green.

With ranked ballots, one would indicate their first, second and third choices when they go into the voting booth. The first choice preferences are counted first. Assuming their are five candidates running in a given riding, the person who gets the least number of votes is dropped from the running and the ballots favouring that candidate are checked to see who the second choice was, and those votes are distributed accordingly among the remaining four. The person who's in fourth place after that process is out of the running, and the ballots favouring him or her are checked for the second choice, and the ballots of the person who finished fifth and checked for the third choices. The process continues until someone has a clear 50 per cent.

The point that Kay made is a lot of Conservative voters would put the Liberal candidate as their second choice, as would many NDP backers. I think Conservative voters who would name a New Democrat as their second choice is rather rare. And I would also think Liberals would be split when it comes to their second choice.

That all assumes, of course, that the Liberals are highly in favour with the electorate, which is not always the case. Think back to the federal election in 2011 in Dufferin-Caledon, when the Liberal candidate finished fourth in a four-way race.

It's interesting, if not futile, to wonder what the 2015 results in Dufferin-Caledon would have been like had ranked ballots been in use.

To refresh your memories, Conservative David Tilson was re-elected, but he had less than 50 per cent of the total vote. He had about 45.76 per cent. It gave him a substantial lead over his three opponents. But in order to get a clear majority, he would have needed another 2,464 votes.

The election night results gave New Democrat Rehya Yazbek 4,353 votes, putting her fourth in the four-way race. I doubt many of those voters would have picked Tilson as their second choice, but I'm sure a few would have, and another few would have named him as their third choice. There is the very, very unlikely possibility that all of them would have put Green Party candidate Nancy Urekar, who came in third election night. Had all of Yazbek's votes been added to Urekar's tally, it would still have left her with 8,798, almost 14,000 shy of the number compiled by Liberal Ed Crewson. No matter what happened, the was no way Urekar was going to remain in contention long, meaning it all came down to a match between Tilson and Crewson.

You number crunchers out there will forgive me, but I already did the crunching. Tilson would have needed 2,464 of those 8,798 second and third choice votes, or 28 per cent. Crewson would have needed 6,335, or 72 per cent.

Who would have won? The best I could offer you would be a guess, and I won't go there.

But the pure election night numbers from Oct. 19 don't tell the whole story, if ranked ballots had been used.

I don't think anyone in Dufferin-Caledon was terribly surprised that Tilson was re-elected.

But the use of ranked ballots might have added a different dynamic.

How many Conservatives, reasoning Tilson was going to win anyway, would have stayed home and not voted Oct.19? Would they have acted different had ranked ballots been used, realizing the closer he came to 50 per cent, the less relevant those second and third choices would have been.

There are other related questions. How many Liberals didn't bother voting, knowing their man didn't have a chance? How many of

those no-shows might have gone to the polls had they appreciated the possible benefits of those second and third choices?

How many Green and NDP backers didn't bother either, and how many more votes would have been realized had they got to the polls?

The nice thing about ranked ballots is they give backers of a smaller party the chance to cast the votes they want to, knowing they can also have influence with their second and third choice.

People wishing, for example, to vote Green may do so, and still have influence.

One of the things this all seems to be boiling down to is ranked ballots can get more people out to the polls to vote election day.

Someone is going to have to do a lot of talking to convince me that's anything but positive.

I grant this is not without a downside.

Use of ranked ballots would be complicated, and a lot of people would have troubled figuring out how the system works. On the other hand, it would give people who understand what's going on the feeling they actually have some influence.

It would also be an organizational nightmare. Individual ballots would have to be counted and scrutinized several times. And who knows how long things would take if there had to be any recounts.

While I have a lot of faith in the use of ranked ballots, it's true that it wouldn't be a perfect system. Indeed, that was one of the main points that came out of the recent panel discussion. When it comes to dealing with various methods of voting at election time, there's no such thing as the perfect system.