

Bill Rea ? Give me ranked ballots

There was an item that I stumbled across in the news last week.

Truth is, I was a little surprised that it didn't get more play in the media.

Scarborough ? Guildwood MPP Mitzie Hunter, a Liberal, has put forth a private member's bill that could impact on future municipal elections in Toronto. The bill, if passed (and I suspect it won't be), would see ranked ballots used. The concept is actually known by a couple of names. The term I've come to be used to is 'preferential ballots.' But as Bill Shakespeare astutely observed some centuries ago, 'What's in a name?'

The way it would 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 in the running for mayor, 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 candidate with a clear majority, then the person in fourth place would be removed from contention, 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 race. Eventually, under this concept, someone has to come up with a clear majority.

Like I stated above, Hunter's bill received little attention from the media, but I decided to follow up on it. I was curious what Dufferin ? Caledon MPP Sylvia Jones thought of the idea. While she admitted she was not completely up on this particular piece of legislation (in fairness, the lady does have a lot of other more pressing matters on her agenda), she did raise one issue that had bothered me too; namely that this bill was aimed specifically at Toronto, and presumably at a certain politician.

Although I have limited use for the buffoon show that has characterized Toronto politics over the last little while, I very much like what Hunter has in mind. I just wish it were more broader based.

For one thing, why not implement it across the board to all levels of government, including federal. I know Hunter's not in a position to influence events in Ottawa, but there are more than 300 MPs who are.

The simple fact is I think this idea has a lot going for it.

I have been a fan of preferential ballots for years. I first saw them used in the 1993 federal election at a nomination meeting of the old Reform Party of Canada. It was one of the very few positive things that gang did for Canada ? their main accomplishment was giving Jean Chretien an open-ended lease on the Prime Minister's Office, which I don't think was anything to brag about.

Granted, the vote-counting process was a long one. If memory serves, there were five candidates seeking the nomination, and it took several hours to pick a winner, with a couple of hundred party members basically sitting around and doing nothing.

I can see more of the same problems if we tried to apply things to a broader election.

For one thing, looking at the federal level, there would be a lot of ridings where the results probably wouldn't be known for a couple of days, at least. Granted, that would not always be the case. In the last federal election in Dufferin-Caledon, David Tilson got 59 per cent of the vote, meaning that the issue would have been settled that night.

But in the 2011 provincial campaign, Jones got 47 per cent, almost 20 percentage points better than Liberal Lori Holloway, who finished second. Jones was a little more than 1,000 votes shy of 50 per cent. Libertarian Daniel Kowalewski finished last, and his 250 votes wouldn't have put anyone over the top, although it stands to reason some of the people who voted for him might have put Jones down as their second or third choice. Karen Gventer was fourth with 5,540 votes. It's possible that the extra thousand votes Jones needed would have come from people who picked Gventer first, but if not, then enough probably would have come from ballots cast for Green candidate Rob Strang.

Another point that needs to be made is the voter turnout figures have been pretty bad in the last couple of elections. In the 2011 provincial count in this riding, only about 46 per cent made it out to the polls. The figures federally were a bit better; not quite 61 per cent. But in both cases, had all the people who didn't bother actually got out to vote, it's possible that the outcomes could have seriously been changed.

So it seems to me that anything that encourages people to get out and vote is a good thing.

There was a time, when I was studying Canadian politics in university that the turnout for federal elections ranged between 70 and 75 per cent. It's frustrating that people don't make more of an effort, but it's also a reality that there's a reason why they don't.

I think a big reason is many people believe their votes don't matter, and the attitude of some of the people we've had heading our governments haven't helped.

As well, it is hard for people who want to vote for a particular party when they know that candidate has very little chance. We've

each only got one vote, and none of us like to think it's being wasted.

With preferential ballots, people would be able to exercise more clout with their votes. Hypothetically, a person wanting to vote for a particular party might be reluctant to waste their vote on a candidate who doesn't have a c



ance, so many people (myself included occasionally) will hold their nose and pick someone with a fighting chance of winning. Being able to pick three people will enable them to do both.

And if we get enough people out to vote for their top-three picks, who knows what that could do with the results. A candidate who has been written off could conceivably sneak through the pack, as the second and third choices are factored in.

Now it is true a system like this would probably be an organizational nightmare, especially the first couple of elections in which it's practised. I can see it taking ages to count all votes, and then figuring a fair system of deciding which votes go where as candidates are eliminated. And since Hunter wants to start this in Toronto there should be lots of fun. There are 35 people (last I checked) running for mayor of Toronto this year, and plenty of time for more to join the race. While Hunter's bill would not take effect for this election, the race for Toronto mayor does tend to attract large fields. I wouldn't want the job of sorting out those ballots.

And the voters would have to be educated too. Right now the system is relatively easy. You go in, vote for one person and you leave. It only takes a couple of minutes. That's one of the reasons I have trouble understanding why turnouts are so low. It doesn't take much time. I can't remember ever having to wait in line more than a minute to vote. But it is true that it's going to take time to get used to a new system.

But on the positive side of things, if it gets more people involved and produces results that are more satisfactory, then I think we should all be for it.