

National Affairs by Claire Hoy ? Less imperfect than all the others

It should be remembered that for the bulk of the last century, the Liberals held power in Ottawa, not necessarily because Canadians coast-to-coast consistently embraced them ? although that, too, happened periodically ? but mainly because the Liberals completely dominated Quebec, making it extremely difficult for the Tories or anybody else to win a majority.

Indeed, as National Post columnist Kelly McParland pointed out in a recent column, in the 110 years between Conservative Sir John A. Macdonald's defeat and Stephen Harper's defeat of Liberal Paul Martin in 2006, the Liberals held power for 77 years.

The reason this matters ? or should matter to you during this election year ? is that during all that time and all those ?majority? governments (and a few ?minorities? as well) the Liberals thought our current first-past-the-post electoral system was just fine, thank you very much.

Things change, however.

And now that the Tories have held office since Martin's demise, current Liberal boss Justin Trudeau ? whose father held office mainly by winning all but one or two seats in Quebec and next to nothing in the West most of the time ? has suddenly discovered that the current system is all wrong. Undemocratic even.

And if he becomes prime minister, well, he's going to change it to make it more representative of how people actually voted.

The most common argument against our current system is that governments win ?majorities? with anywhere from 37 to 45 percent of the vote. Therefore, we are told, all those people, the actual majority in fact, who did not vote for the government party are deprived of their voice.

This wasn't true when the Liberals held office, but it's obviously true with Harper in charge. Therefore, it must change, says Trudeau, although you can bet if he wins next time out under the current system he'll lose some of his enthusiasm for change. (It's just like his initial promise to hold ?open? nomination meetings for his party. He actually means that too, except when he doesn't, i.e. when there's a candidate he favors and wants to make sure he or she get nominated. But we digress.)

No electoral system is perfect, of course, but I defy you to point out a country which has been better served over the years than Canada.

There are other systems out there, most involving some kind of proportional representation, which does two things our system does not do: first, it virtually guarantees perpetual minority governments and legislative deadlocks; and second, it inevitably involves backroom boys and girls getting to choose who represents the voters under their partisan banner. At least under the current system, you know in advance who you're going to get in Ottawa. Not so under most of the other systems.

What happens when we get into proportional representation and that sort of thing is that after the actual election, party leaders spend weeks ? sometimes months ? horse trading behind closed doors, offering goodies to other lesser parties, hoping to gather enough seats to run the government.

More often than not the result of these systems is that some fringe parties on the right or left get to exercise far more clout than the electorate ever meant them to.

This is why voters in both Ontario and British Columbia, when asked recently in referenda during recent elections, overwhelmingly rejected changing the current system. They like it the way it is, warts and all, recognizing that other systems have even greater issues to deal with.

The smaller parties ? the NDP traditionally for example ? have always favored a new system. That's because they always knew they couldn't get elected under the current rules and because other systems would allow them to exercise far more control over the inevitable minorities these other systems would produce.

There is also implicit in this whole notion that just because your particular candidate didn't win in your riding, therefore you are not represented. Yes, you are.

Having been voting in elections at all levels for more than half a century, I can't tell you how infrequently I have actually voted for somebody who won. I always seem to be living in a riding where the candidate and/or party I favor has no shot.

But I have never felt I wasn't represented in Ottawa ? or Queen's Park, or City Hall for that matter. To be sure,, my ?representative? may have a different ideology, but he or she still has to represent my interests ? and your interests ? or he or she will find themselves unemployed after the next election.

As the old saw goes, if it ain't broken, don't fix it. Yes, it's not perfect, but it's less imperfect than any other system out there.

