

# Citizenship and Democracy: A Case for Proportional Representation

by Nick Loenen

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When Jean Chrétien campaigned for leadership of the Liberal Party in 1984, he pledged to bring in a system of proportional representation. It would be one of his "first acts as prime minister." When he did become prime minister in 1993, he developed acute amnesia and never even discussed proportional representation.

Once a politician is in power, election promises are often soon forgotten. And these broken promises have made voters skeptical and increasingly disillusioned and apathetic. A large percentage of our fellow Canadians even show disdain for their political leaders and no longer show interest in the political process. Party loyalty is also disappearing, as politicians no longer represent the interests of ordinary people. What democracy requires is vigorous debate. But our Disneyland culture has reduced elections to a spectator sport, a theatrical performance. Politics has been infected by the postmodern notion that nobody is what they say they are, and "it's all a game." The emphasis has shifted from ideological principle to political leaders. Politics is no longer a matter of principled ideas but of personalities. The voter switches from less appealing to more popular leaders. The switch is not made on the basis of changed political convictions but rather because of the aura and the image of the party leader. The focus of attention is now on the looks of the party leader, on his/her personality, dress and hairstyle. The TV image of a candidate as a celebrity with clever sound bites is now more important than substance in debate. The TV format demands all candidates to look the same: confident, upbeat, untroubled, and therefore unreal.

Modern Canadian politics also deprives citizens of the right to live according to their convictions. Christians are repeatedly told that politics and religion don't mix. In other words, citizens are welcome to attend a church of their choice but are denied equal treatment in politics. But our understanding of religion does not consider it as a private affair. The government should do its utmost to fairly protect every belief system and to discriminate against none. Public justice demands equal treatment in politics for a Christian perspective and involvement. This means that Canada should have a level playing field for all political parties in order to survive as a democracy. As a nation we are facing crucial questions regarding whether the innocent unborn should be slaughtered or protected, whether a person has the right to a natural death or whether euthanasia should be legalized, and whether the family should be redefined or the traditional family should be enhanced. As we no longer live in a Christian but in a neo-pagan culture, Christians must let their voice be heard in the public square. But Canada's antiquated and anti-democratic system is an enormous stumbling block for a Christian political party to gain representation in parliament. The short history of the Christian Heritage Party and its lack of representation in the House of Commons due to our electoral system is a prime example.

The injustice of the contemporary Canadian concept of democracy is the subject of Nick Loenen's book. We don't have a democracy but an elected dictatorship. Loenen rightly observes that in our version of democracy a minority of citizens every four or five years selects the captain of our ship of state, who then orders everyone off the bridge for the duration of the voyage. There is no role for citizens in between elections except to pay taxes. But what about the members of parliament? Don't they represent their ridings? Our first-past-the-post system, single member constituencies, do not reflect the diversity of the population. And in our system, unlike the British, party members have no freedom to break ranks even if it means to vote against their conscience. They have to toe the party line. Not without reason, backbenchers in the House of Commons have been called "trained seals." The same is true of the provincial legislature.

Canada's governments lack legitimacy, as our voting system awards majority governments to minorities. In 1935 the Liberals won with a majority that was unprecedented since Confederation. The Liberal leader Mackenzie King hailed the outcome as a victory for democracy. But he claimed too much! It was significant that the victory was won with only a minor increase in the Liberal vote since 1930. Newly founded parties attracted almost one-quarter of the voters and the overwhelming majority in the House of Commons was won with the support of half of the electorate. After each election there is a hue and a cry for change, and rightly so. But nothing has changed. The actual results of elections never reflect the percentage of votes cast for each party. In 1993, for example, the Liberals won 177 seats (59 per cent of the total of 299) on 41 per cent of the vote. But the separatist Bloc Quebecois won 54 seats (18 per cent of the total) on 14 per cent of the vote and the Reform Party won 52 seats (17 per cent of the total) on 19 per cent of the vote. The Conservatives won only 2 seats (less than 1 per cent of the total) on 16 per cent of the vote.

The current House of Commons percentages are not much better. If the electorate had fair representation based on the real worth of each vote, Canada would have had a minority Liberal government. The provincial voting system creates the same disparity. In the 1997 election in Alberta, the Conservatives won 63 per cent of the seats in the legislature, or 76 per cent of the total. The opposition won 49 per cent of the votes but only got 24 seats. The Alberta government is free to carry out its agenda without a viable opposition, as it can function as a "democratic dictatorship." This unfair system obviously endangers democracy for two reasons. Loenen points out that government accountability is weak; and second, the composition of Parliament and legislatures is not representative. He argues eloquently and convincingly for proportional representation, a system which more accurately translates the voters' preferences into seats, concentrating power less in cabinet, and more accurately in Parliament. Loenen states:

The principle is that representation in Parliament and the legislatures of groups of like-minded voters is in proportion to that group's voting strength. For example, if a party obtains 40 per cent of the popular vote, that party obtains 40 per cent of the seats.

The proportional system is not a novelty. It is used in most democracies (including South Africa, which struggles with enormous linguistic, and cultural diversities), as this system clearly reflects in theory and practice the essence of democracy. Everyone benefits and no one is excluded.

The voting system Loenen prefers is the **single transferable vote (STV)** in multi-member districts. This system is designed to be maximally sensitive to the preference of the voters. Under it, political parties have no formal role. Votes are cast for candidates, not for parties, within multi-member districts. For example, Loenen proposes for British Columbia 15-multi-member districts to replace the existing 75 single member districts. Votes cast for unsuccessful candidates are redistributed and the "excess" votes cast in favour of successful candidates are allocated proportionally to the alternative choices of those who voted for them. The system is used in the Republic in Ireland. It allows voters to express a preference among candidates from more than one party.

I wholeheartedly agree with Loenen's arguments for proportional representation. Its time has come. The electorate should put pressure on the government for real democratic representation. The first-past-the-post system in single districts is antiquated, unfair, produces untold "waste votes," and discourages debate and political participation. However, unlike Loenen, I prefer the mixed member proportional system (MMP), or the German system. The MMP maintains local representation by having one-half of the candidates elected by first-past-the-post-method, and the other half from the candidates nominated by political parties. Each voter therefore has two votes: one for the candidate in their electoral district and the other for the political party of their choice. The New Zealand electorate rejected STV in a 1992 referendum and chose MMP instead. I believe that the STV system favours the individual at the expense of the community. For example, Christians, in covenant with one another, can work together on a political platform for the common good. In the MMP system a Christian party would be free to stand for and to promote its own principles without losing the opportunity to have a voice in Parliament or legislature.

I am grateful to Nick Loenen, former member of the Legislative Assembly of British Columbia for his articulate, carefully reasoned, well documented and important book. I hope that it will be widely read!

Johan D. Tangelder  
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