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The pros and cons of Canada's first-past-the-post electoral system - Politics

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3-4 minutes

As part of his 32-point plan to "restore democracy," Liberal Leader Justin Trudeau said Tuesday that if elected, he would create a special, all-party parliamentary committee to study alternatives to the current first-past-the-post (FPTP) electoral system, including ranked ballots, proportional representation, mandatory voting and online voting.

- [Justin Trudeau vows to end 1st-past-the-post voting in platform speech](#)

Here are some things to know about first-past-the-post:

How does Canada's FPTP voting system work?

In every riding, the candidate that wins the highest number of votes wins the right to represent that particular seat in the House of Commons.

The winner does not need an absolute majority — i.e., more than 50 per cent of the votes cast in the riding.

Why do some people have a problem with that?

It means many candidates win their seats with less than 50 per cent of the votes.

It also means two people running in different ridings can each earn the same percentage of the vote but one may win while the other does not.

The first-past-the-post system can also encourage what some call tactical voting — casting a ballot not for the person you want to vote for, but for the candidate best positioned to defeat the candidate you most dislike.

What is one popular alternative?

It's called proportional representation, and it would benefit smaller parties that win a respectable share of the overall votes cast in the country, but can't quite eke out a first-place finish in a particular riding to win an actual seat in the House of Commons.

There are a variety of PR models but the objective is to make a party's share of seats in the Commons equal to their slice of the popular vote.

Generally, PR involves electing multiple members in each district, with seats assigned according to each party's share of the vote in that district.

What makes this an issue in Canada?

There are a lot more political parties in Canada than you might think.

Elections Canada says there were 18 political parties registered in 2011, down from the all-time high of 19 in 2008.

In 1972, just four parties were registered.

There was an average of five candidates per riding in the 2011 election, with as few as three and as many as nine in any given riding.

Consequently, dividing up Commons according to each party's share of the vote would make it more difficult for any one party to amass a majority of seats.

Experts suggest first-past-the-post provides for more stability whereas PR would likely result in more coalition governments.

Governing by coalition — when multiple parties come together to pool their resources and form a plurality — is the status quo in a number of countries around the world, most notably Israel.



Proportional Representation vs. First-Past-The-Post

Proportional Representation vs. First-Past-The-Post

by Robert Testa

Updated October 09, 2017

Seeing as the stability in Canada is quite significant although we are using the plurality system, there are nevertheless many ways that it could be improved. The system can be improved by adding the principles of justice and impartiality to permanence by implementing a PR electoral system. "PR makes every vote count and produces results that are proportionate to what voters desire" (Hiemstra and Jansen).

Also, by developing regional representation in larger parties, it would have an overall positive increase in the steadiness of the country. Therefore, since we have come to realize that the plurality system must be changed and that proportional representation is a system which could heal the damages made by first-past-the-post, the obvious step that must be taken in order to create a close-to-perfect electoral system would be to combine proportional representation and plurality to form a mixed-member proportional system.

There are a number of advantages to this kind of change. One is that a mixed system would preserve the connection between members and their constituencies, which is something that proportional representation in its pure form fails to do (Caron 21).

Possibly the largest debate surrounding why PR is not the best electoral system is the one regarding the relationship between voter and MP.

This sole fact destroys any validity in an argument supporting plurality because of these claims. Mixed-member proportional is obviously a better system of election. Despite the facts, many people fear to see a mixed system because of the fact that proportional representation carries along with it problems related to stability.

Although this may be factual, "...no democratic system, whether first-past-the-post or mixed, can guarantee government stability" (Caron 21). Once again, although it offers many advantages, "...the first-past-the-post method produces serious distortions that a mixed voting method might remedy" (Caron 19). In regards to the mixed-member system, reports demonstrate the fact that governments resulting from PR are quite successful, less ignorant to the wants of the citizen and citizens become less apathetic and more content with the way the system works (Gordon).

It has become completely obvious that the most dependable and realistic way of electing Members of Parliament to the House of Commons is palpably proportional representation. Proportional representation is obviously a superior electoral system to the first-past-the-post system because of its local, provincial and federal voter turnout increase. PR encourages women to have a greater representation in the national government. "There is a distinct gap in women's representation in national legislatures between countries with single-member district electoral systems and those with proportional representation electoral systems" (Matland and Studlar 707).

The differences that have been shown between Norway and Canada prove that this is apparent.

Canada's first-past-the-post voting system is notoriously unfair. The system is based on the winner-take-all principle, which means votes and voters are not treated equally. The only voters who win political representation are those who share the most popular partisan viewpoint in their riding, as expressed at the ballot box. The other voters lose their right to political representation (Gordon).

There are numerous admirable grounds on why the plurality system works within a government. There would exist no

plurality system if this was not true. Why would one use a faulty system if it would only cause damage? Cases have shown that the plurality system is not completely unpleasant, it just does not accomplish as much as PR does.

If the plurality system is failing us, and proportional representation can remedy what has been broken as a result of plurality, the resulting system which would best be implemented into Canada's electoral system is that of the mixed-member proportional system. The mixed-member system would indisputably fix all of the mistakes caused by the plurality system all the while increasing voter turnout and female legislative representation. Unfortunately, although this may be the best system of election, the leaders of this country will never let it come into place simply because it seems to increase the validity of opposing parties' votes. Canada needs a party in power who will understand that "...this isn't about left vs. right, or east vs. west, or anglophone vs. francophone. It is about one citizen, one vote, one value. Its about building a level playing field in our political arena" (Gordon).

ADVANTAGES OF PROPORTIONAL REPRESENTATION

The concept of "power in numbers" is omnipotent in every form within society. Proportional representation (PR), when executed suitably, is completely based on the "power in numbers" idea. It proves to the population that every vote counts. Proportional representation is undoubtedly a better system of voting Members of Parliament into the House of Commons because of its ease of use and fairness to the entire Canadian population. An excellent example of this is demonstrated by Norway who has been using PR for more than 11 years. The Norwegians have nearly perfected this form of voting and have had little to no problems with it.

Another sizable reason why proportional representation should be instituted into the Canadian way of voting is that it tightens the gap of women's representation. This gap has been growing significantly because of the single-member district electoral system. PR would decrease this gap. Another reason why PR should be instituted into the Canadian governmental system is that of the high turnout of voters it would bring. This is largely because of the knowledge of voters that their vote will count for more in the PR system than it would in the plurality system. Proportional representation would not be considered in countries such as Japan, Russia, and New Zealand if it was not a feasible idea that could be implemented into their governments with ease. The biggest problem with plurality is the obvious problems with representation and regional conflict that it has plagued the Canadian government with for many decades. Although there is a great representation of the parties that receive the "majority" of the votes, there is hardly any representation for the minority parties; this then causes a large regional conflict. Plurality only increases a number of tensions between regions. Problems between the French-Canadians and English-Canadians have been heightened because of the lack of proportional representation. The Canadian government should look to the Norwegian's and follow their healthy lead. It is completely evident that proportional representation is the most reliable and feasible method for electing the Members of Parliament to the House of Commons.

A very substantial reason why proportional representation is the better electoral system than the first-past-the-post system is that it has been proven in other countries to increase voter turnout in local, provincial and national levels. The reason for this is that with a plurality, one can only count on the larger parties to win; therefore, instead of "throwing away" a vote for a smaller, less popular party, the voter would either vote for the larger party or not vote at all. "Because seats can be gained [in PR] with only a fraction of the total vote, voters have fewer incentives to abandon their most preferred candidates. Accordingly, the number of viable candidates increases with PR" (Boix 610). Plurality can occasionally result in outrageous outcomes. For example, "the right-wing British Columbia Liberals won a provincial election, taking 97 per cent of the seats (all but 2) with just 58 per cent of the vote" (Carty 930). People often wonder why in Canada, no more than 50 per cent of the population votes during any governmental election. Reasons for this could be a result of a handful of factors. Citizens could be apathetic to which party wins; they could be ignorant in regards to politics or, the majority of the population that does not vote is probably no longer concerned with politics because of the discrimination of the plurality system.

"...inequalities in the representation of the different political parties... are regarded by some commentators as factors leading to a loss of interest in politics, and even to disaffection" (Caron 21). Some will wonder, after being educated on the topic, that for the most part, if proportional representation seems to be a better way of electing MP's to the House of Commons, why has it not been implemented into our electoral system? The answer to this question lies in the fact that once in power under the first-past-the-post system; the political party that may have once wanted to put into effect the

system of proportional representation would most likely have a change in thought. "Unfortunately, those good intentions often melt away like snow on a sunny day once the party comes to power" (Caron 22). Sadly, this is, in fact, a legitimate way to govern as a dictatorship (Caron 21).

WHY PR IS NOT THE BEST ELECTORAL SYSTEM

It has been proven in many cases that proportional representation encourages women to have more of a representation in the national government. "There is a distinct gap in women's representation in national legislatures between countries with single-member district electoral systems and those with proportional representation electoral systems" (Matland and Studlar 707). The differences between Norway and Canada show that this is evident. "...the proportion of women in the Norwegian Storting increased from 6.7% to 15.5% from 1957 to 1973" (Matland and Studlar 716). The reason for this drastic jump in women's representation in Norway is because of the increased pressure that smaller parties, such as the New Democratic Party in Canada, put on larger parties to have more female representatives.

...as smaller but competitive parties, usually on the political fringe, start to promote women actively, larger parties will move to emulate them. This should happen for at least two reasons. First, by nominating women, smaller parties may demonstrate that there is no electoral penalty associated with women candidates.... Second, larger parties will feel increased pressure to respond by more actively promoting women themselves (Matland and Studlar 712).

Some may state that these are solely false claims and that they may only work "on paper", but when implemented into the real world, supporters of plurality falsely attempt to affirm that it will not. It has been proven that the representation of women had increased by at least 10 per cent in 11 of the 16 countries that used the PR electoral system (Matland and Studlar 709).

There must be several excellent reasons why the plurality system works within a government because if there were not, we would not have been using the system, to begin with. Many have mentioned the fact that plurality is a good system with the saying "if it ain't broke, then don't fix it"; however, what one must understand is that of course the plurality system may be a working electoral system; nevertheless, that does not dismiss the fact that there may be a more improved, more reasonable system of electing MP's. One may argue that with a plurality, the parties must fight hard in order to win in each of the countries many ridings. "If you could win all the regions, then power was almost guaranteed. The plurality system makes this difficult, but this very difficulty caused parties to make the kind of effort necessary for success. The electoral process is a kind of test that only committed parties can pass" (Barker 309). Although this seems to be a valid case nonetheless, the underlying outrageousness of this quote completely demonstrates how unfair plurality can be to minority parties. Some may argue that "...the two issues central to the discussion of electoral systems in Canada are a *representation* and *regional conflict*. Changes in electoral systems... would have little effect on either" (Barker 309). Although there may seem to be equal representation and hardly any regional conflict in Canada, this is clearly not the case. It becomes more obvious that there is a substantial lack of representation in the plurality system and that this system sparks many conflicts between regions when one divulges the true facts of the matter. Although it may seem to keep national unity, it has been an inclination of the plurality system to give small, resolute parties more seats than they deserve (Hiemstra and Jansen 295). The first-past-the-post electoral system has the ability to generate parties with national support; however, they encounter it only with enormous complexity. "Is it not safer to proceed with a system such as PR that makes fully national parties more probable?" (Barker 313). The plurality also seems to be a better electoral system because it preserves the relationship between the constituent and representative. It has been said that if proportional representation is put into operation, the bond involving the voter and the MP would be lost (Barker 307); however, what some may not understand is that the debate about proportional representation "...revolves around one type of PR. But other proposed reforms of the electoral system have been forwarded. a particularly popular one is the combination of plurality and PR (mixed-member proportional)" (Barker 313).

Be Sure to Continue to Page 3 of "Proportional Representation vs. First-Past-The-Post".

SOURCES

nationalpost.com

Andrew Coyne: Don't fear Trudeau's proportional representation bogeymen

Andrew Coyne

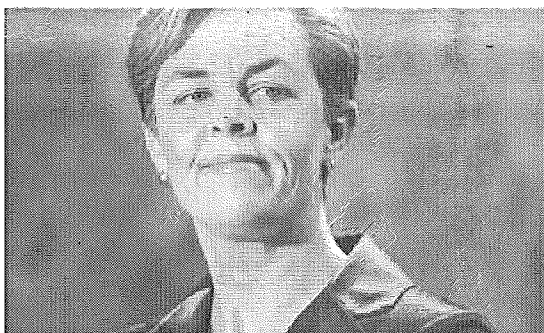
6-7 minutes

Perhaps unsatisfied with the response to his earlier attempt to blame the public for breaking his promise on electoral reform, Justin Trudeau has lately tried a new tack. He did it, he now says, to save the country. The problem, it turns out, wasn't that there was "no consensus": the problem, rather, was that there was — in favour of proportional representation. The prime minister who pledged, before the election, to "make every vote count," now warns that to do so would imperil the Canada we hold dear.

"Do you think that Kellie Leitch should have her own party," he asked a questioner, bizarrely, at a town-hall gathering last week in Iqaluit. I had not heard it suggested until now that Ms. Leitch was thinking of forming a party of one, but clearly the peril this represents was uppermost in the prime minister's mind.

Under proportional representation, he told his audience, "a party that represents the fringe voices" (even scarier than the Kellie Leitch Party, one assumes) might win "10, 15, 20 seats in the House" and "end up holding the balance of power." PR, he elaborated the next day, "would augment extremist voices," bringing on an era of "instability and uncertainty" and "putting at risk the very thing that makes us luckier than anyone else on the planet."





Liam Richards/CP

It's a safe bet this argument was carefully focus-grouped. The notion that only the electoral system stands in the way of Canadians voting neo-Nazi en masse — or Islamist, or Radical Vegan, pick your bogeyman — is never far from the surface of these discussions. Like other fears of the unknown, it is easy to raise, and hard to refute so long as nobody stops to think about it for half a second.

What, first, is the evidence of this barely suppressed urge to vote for fringe or extremist parties? In the past election, the vote for all fringe parties combined — parties, that is, other than the five currently represented in the House of Commons — added up to 0.79 per cent of the vote. Over the past two decades, it has averaged just over one per cent. The largest fringe party typically receives less than one-third of one per cent of the vote.

Even at the riding level, it is the rare fringe party that manages to obtain so much as one per cent of the vote. In the past election, just 49 candidates from half a dozen parties managed it; in the previous election, only 22. Fewer still get over the two-per-cent mark, and you could count the number of those who reach the fabled three-per-cent threshold on one hand.

Of course, if you change the voting system, you change voter behaviour.

Without the formidable hurdle presented by single-member plurality voting, where only the first-place candidate in each riding gets into

Parliament, perhaps it would not feel quite so futile to vote for smaller, even fringe parties. Perhaps more people then would. Fine.

Suppose twice as many did — no, three times. Hell, make it four, no, five times as many: a 400-per-cent increase in the fringe vote. That still wouldn't be enough to elect a single member, let alone the 15 or 20 the prime minister foresees — no, not even under proportional representation.

It's important not to exaggerate how much would change under PR. It's possible to win now, in a riding with several candidates, with as little as 28 per cent of the vote, and quite common to do so with less than 33 per cent. Suppose instead we elected MPs in five-member ridings, as recommended for example by the BC Citizens Assembly in 2005. It would still take a minimum of 16.7 per cent of the vote to win a seat in such a system. (Why not 20 per cent? Do the math: with a sixth of the vote, plus one, it would be impossible for five candidates to finish ahead of you). With smaller electoral districts, it would take even more; with larger ones, less — but even with 10-member districts you'd still need nine per cent of the vote, or about three times as much as the most successful fringe candidate now obtains.

Yes, that would give smaller parties a better chance of electing MPs — smaller, not fringe. See, the thing about of fringe parties is that they're fringe. The reason so few Canadians vote for them now isn't, for the most part, because of our electoral system. It's because few Canadians support them. Of course, the definition is a bit tautological: some of today's mainstream parties were once considered fringe. The Reform party, the Bloc Québécois, and the Greens all started out on the fringe. Is the present system too "risky," for failing to keep them out?

And who are the parties that now populate the margins? The

largest, by far, are the free-market Libertarians and the social-conservative Christian Heritage party — maybe not your cup of tea in either case, but neither one remotely threatening to our democracy. The rest — the Communists, the Animal Alliance and so on — are a motley bunch to be sure, but not one of them fits the kind of dark, alt-right fantasy of the prime minister's imagining. Such parties exist in Europe, to be sure: but we are not Europe — a continent with little experience of immigration suddenly coping with the influx of hundreds of thousands of refugees from a war zone.

I wouldn't want to see any of those parties get into Parliament here either. I think the chances of them doing so are pretty slim, under any system. But I also respect the democratic rights of other Canadians. If I think a party would be bad for Canada, it's my responsibility to get out and persuade my fellow citizens not to vote for them — not rig the system so they can't.

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How Proportional Representation Empowers the Far-Right

11-14 minutes

“Radical right parties benefit from PR [proportional representation] in terms of their share of seats, which is what matters, after all, for the power, legitimacy, status, and resources that flow from elected office.” — Professor [Pippa Norris](#), Harvard University



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Take Care of Yourself: The Science and Practice of Well-Being comes to the Lower Mainland in February 2018.

The far-right is rising in Europe, riding a wave of anti-immigrant Islamophobia, intolerance and disturbing — sometimes outright neo-Nazi — sentiments.

And many European countries' proportional representation electoral systems are making it much easier for far-right politicians to win seats in parliaments, giving them legitimacy and the ability to amplify their hateful views to a much wider audience.

Supporters of proportional representation in British Columbia, where a referendum that could change electoral systems will take place in the fall of 2018, vociferously disagree, but experts and evidence show disturbing trends that cannot be ignored.

As a longtime opponent of proportional representation — I led No BC STV, the group that defeated the single transferable vote electoral system in referenda in 2005 and 2009 — I know proponents of proportional representation hate to discuss how those electoral systems opens the door to parliaments for extremists.

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But with recent outbreaks of far-right actions here in B.C. — including white supremacist flyers at the University of Victoria as well as racist “white pride” posters seen this week in Burnaby and a Chilliwack school trustee attacking the Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity program that supports lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer students — there should be no doubt that this province has a substantial number of potential far-right voters.

And adopting a proportional representation electoral system would potentially open the doors of the legislature to far-right politicians and their abhorrent views.

Under proportional representation, representatives can be elected in some countries like The Netherlands with less than one per cent of the popular vote, although a five-per-cent threshold is more common.

But under the current first-past-the-post — or majoritarian — electoral system, politicians are only elected in geographic ridings based on who captures the most votes, marginalizing both far-right and far-left parties and leaving them unable to win seats.

As Harvard’s Pippa Norris writes: “Majoritarian electoral systems work exactly as proponents claim by excluding extreme parties from parliament... And, as expected, radical right parties gain their greatest parliamentary rewards under PR elections.”

“Despite having roughly the same share of the vote, radical right parties were more than twice as successful in gaining seats under PR as under majoritarian elections,” Norris found in researching seats won by radical right wing parties in 39 nations.

There are many factors in the rise of far-right parties — economic, social, cultural and more — but it’s clear that proportional representation has allowed politicians with views that are far different from those of the majority easier access to parliaments and the ability to further propagate their disturbing views from positions of influence and respect.

The results of proportional representation systems boosting the far-right can be seen in several recent European elections.

In Austria, the far-right Freedom Party has the third largest number of seats after October elections. It was once led by a former Nazi

functionary and SS officer and leader Heinz-Christian Strache was arrested as a young man for participating in a banned neo-Nazi movement modelled on Hitler Youth.

The Freedom Party is anti-Islam, anti-migrant and proposed \$14 billion in tax cuts funded by reductions in social programs — especially for foreigners.

And the Austrian People's Party, which captured the most seats, is also very right wing and may include the Freedom Party in a governing coalition.

The People's Party, led by 31-year-old Sebastian Kurz, has argued that migrants rescued from boats in the Mediterranean should be returned to Africa and that Muslim kindergartens should be banned. As foreign minister, Kurz introduced a burqa ban and a law prohibiting foreign funding of mosques in Austria.

The Freedom Party won 51 seats in the Austrian National Council, just one behind the Social Democratic Party at 50 and only 11 seats back of Kurz's People's Party at 62 in the 183-seat parliament.

Austria uses an open list proportional representation system with nine multi-member constituencies.

The far-right rise isn't confined to Austria. In Germany's Sept. 24 election, the far-right, anti-Islam, anti-immigrant Alternative for Germany (AfD) surged to win 13 per cent of the vote and 94 seats in that country's proportional representation electoral system.

Germany has a mixed member proportional system, where parties contest geographical ridings but additional seats are added from party lists to match the national popular vote each party achieves.

The AfD condemns German Chancellor Angela Merkel, whose Christian Democratic Union has led Europe in assisting refugees fleeing war in Syria.

"We are being heterogenized and diluted" and "the German people... are meant to silently accept this change and ultimately the loss of our homeland," Hilse said in a campaign speech.

And while Merkel is unlikely to include the AfD in a coalition government — which has still not been formed — it has already influenced the country's immigration policies.

The AfD's strong showing will "change the discourse, change the narrative and pull other parties to the right," says London School of Economics professor Henning Meyer.

And proportional representation has given the AfD far more seats than it could possibly win under first-past-the-post.

In fact, only three of the 94 AfD members elected won geographical ridings, with the other 91 seats coming from party lists to reflect its share of the vote.

In the Netherlands, the far-right Party for Freedom led by Geert Wilders gained five seats to become the second largest party in March elections, but did not make the anticipated breakthrough early polls had indicated.

Wilders is an extremist who launched his campaign by denouncing “Moroccan scum who make the streets unsafe” and was been convicted of inciting discrimination against Dutch Moroccans in 2016.

The Party for Freedom’s election manifesto is full of racist promises.

“Millions of Dutch citizens have simply had enough of the Islamization of our country. Enough of mass immigration and asylum, terror, violence and insecurity,” the manifesto begins. “Here is our plan: instead of financing the entire world and people we don’t want here, we’ll spend the money on ordinary Dutch citizens.”

Manifesto goals include closing all mosques and Islamic schools, banning the Qur’an and Islamic headscarves in public functions and ‘de-Islamizing’ the Netherlands. It would bar asylum seekers or immigrants from Islamic countries and withdraw asylum residence permits already granted.

The far-right has also gained prominence in other European countries with proportional representation, including Belgium, Denmark, Switzerland, Poland, Greece and Bulgaria.

But not the United Kingdom under first-past-the-post.

Despite a significant rise in support to 12.6 per cent for the far-right UK Independence Party [UKIP] in the 2015 elections, giving it the the third largest party total, it won only one seat of 650 in parliament. Then-leader Nigel Farage failed to win his own seat. And the party was devastated in the 2017 election, garnering just 1.8 per cent of the vote and no seats.

Proportional representation would have given UKIP 82 seats in 2015 and potentially a substantial role in government.

Far away from Europe, but still under a mixed member proportional representation electoral system, is New Zealand. That country — also with a far-right party — illustrates how proportional representation allows minor fringe parties with no ability to win geographic ridings to win a significant number of seats and hold the balance of power and decide which party forms government and with what policy concessions.

After New Zealand's September election, the Labour Party under new leader Jacinda Ardern formed a government with the support of the Green Party and its eight-seat caucus. But it also required the support of the far-right New Zealand First Party and its nine seats to gain a majority in a coalition.

New Zealand First leader Winston Peters has made racist comments against immigrants and people of Asian descent, attacked the media with the fervour of Donald Trump and considered backing the right-wing National Party instead of Labour to form a government.

But Peters is now the deputy prime minister and foreign minister and the price of his support has already been made clear: the new Labour government has promised to slash immigration by tens of thousands, banned foreign ownership of property and intends to force those on social assistance to work for their benefits.

The Guardian newspaper summed up the bizarre nature of the situation when New Zealand First leader Peters told media that his party's board of directors — all unelected and unnamed — would decide which major party would govern the country:

"Nearly three weeks after New Zealand's general election, the country is waiting for an anonymous, unelected board of individuals belonging to a minor party to make a decision on who forms the next government," reporter Eleanor Ainge Roy wrote.

What's also astonishing is that New Zealand First has not in five consecutive elections since 2005 been able to win even a single geographic riding or "electorate" seat in parliament.

Of course, neither could the Green Party win any geographic ridings in those three elections — or in any election since 1999, when they won their single geographic seat to date.

There will be much debate on proportional representation leading up to B.C.'s mail-in ballot referendum in the fall of 2018.

And like it or not, those who want to get rid of the first-past-the-post system will have to explain why we should change to an electoral system that would help far-right politicians — who would have no chance otherwise — gain the legitimacy, prestige and influence of seats in the B.C. Legislature.

[Editor's Note: Tieleman's weekly column ends

The Tyee has run Bill Tieleman's column weekly every Tuesday since April 2009, as well as his extensive coverage of the Basi-Virk/BC Rail case from 2004 to 2010 and other feature articles.

That column has been a longer, mostly much longer, version of columns written for 24 Hours Vancouver, the free daily newspaper published by Postmedia. Recently Postmedia requested that Tieleman write that column exclusively for 24 Hours Vancouver, ending an agreement that allowed The Tyee to publish the longer columns.

Tieleman — who was on the original The Tyee advisory committee when the publication was created — will continue to write for The Tyee regularly.]

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