THE TIMLIN LECTURE

"Doing Democracy Differently: Has Electoral Reform Finally Arrived?"

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Electoral Reform.

7:30 p.m.
March 1, 2004
St. Thomas More Auditorium
University of Saskatchewan
The Timlin Lecture

This is the twentieth in a series of lectures established in 1983 in honour of Mabel Frances Timlin (1891-1976). Mabel Timlin’s association with the University of Saskatchewan began in 1921 when she took employment as a secretary in one of its departments. In 1929 she was made director of the University’s programme of correspondence courses, a position she held until 1942. She began her graduate training in economics in 1932 at the University of Washington. Taking summer courses and one six month leave, she fulfilled her residency requirements by 1935. That year she was given her first regular academic employment: instructor in economics at the University of Saskatchewan.

Her dissertation on Keynes’ General Theory was completed in 1940 and published by the University of Toronto Press in 1942 under the title Keynesian Economics. From Keynesian theory, Mabel Timlin turned to welfare economics, which she studied while on a Guggenheim Fellowship in 1945. She next took up a study of immigration policy which was to occupy her attention for many years; on that topic she published a brief monograph entitled Does Canada Need More People? (Oxford University Press, 1951). Her scholarly papers, a dozen in number, on general economic theory, welfare economics, monetary policy and immigration policy were published in the Canadian Journal of Economics and Political Science, the American Economic Review, and edited volumes of essays. After retiring from her university appointment, she completed a commissioned study of the funding and organization of social science research, which was published in Mabel F. Timlin and Albert Faucher, The Social Sciences in Canada: Two Studies (Social Science Research Council of Canada, 1968). In all, hers was a prodigious output for one whose first work saw print when its author was fifty years of age.

She held office in the Canadian Political Science Association (member of executive 1941-1943, vice-president 1953-1955, and president 1959-1960; and she was elected, by ballot of the membership, a member of the executive of the American Economic Association (term 1958-1960). She was elected to the Royal Society of Canada in 1951 and was awarded a Canada Council Senior Fellowship in 1959. In 1976 she was named a Member for the Order of Canada.
R.K. Carty holds degrees from the University of New Brunswick, Oxford University, and Queen's University. He is a Professor of Political Science at the University of British Columbia and a former Head of that department. His research has been primarily concerned with the nature of political organization, especially political parties. Professor Carty's work on political systems in Europe, Canada and Australia has been published widely. His most recent book, co-authored with Lisa Young and William Cross, is Rebuilding Canadian Party Politics (UBC Press, 2000).

At UBC, Professor Carty is a Senior Fellow of Green College, one of the university's resident graduate colleges, and Chair of the Publications Board of UBC Press, one of the country's major scholarly publishers. He is a past President of the Canadian Political Science Association and is currently a member of the national advisory board of the Canadian Democratic Audit project located at the Centre for Canadian Studies at Mt. Allison University.

Professor Carty has served as a researcher for provincial and national Royal Commissions on electoral districting, party financing and organization, and electoral law. He has been a consultant to the Chief Electoral Officer of Canada and the Ombudsman of British Columbia as well as the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation. During 2002-03 he was a member of the Federal Electoral Boundaries Commission for British Columbia. He is currently serving as the Director of Research for the British Columbia Citizens' Assembly on Electoral Reform.
Doing Democracy Differently: 
Has Electoral Reform Finally Arrived in Canada?

R. Kenneth Carty 
The University of British Columbia

When I accepted the invitation over a year ago to come to Saskatchewan to deliver the Timlin lecture it was not clear to me what I should talk about. The committee is both generous and trusting. It assumes that those it invites will find a way to keep an interested audience politely enthralled for the requisite 45 minutes. At the time I suppose that I probably expected to turn my attention to the shifting structure and dynamics of Canadian party politics, the area that I have written most about. I expect that my hosts assumed that this would be appropriate in a period when the national parties were juggling for position in the lead-up to a new election. As it happens, the recent organizational turmoil and leadership change in the Liberal party, the efforts by the right to reorganize themselves, and the threat by the NDP to return to life are all interesting issues deserving our careful attention. But not tonight, for when it actually sunk in that I had accepted an invitation to deliver one of the most prestigious lectures in the country it quickly occurred to me that the members and friends of the Departments of Economics and Political Studies, ‘no ordinary academics,’ would expect more than a familiar account – however dressed up in systems theory or other jargon – of the reorganization of our electoral politics.

It never occurred to me then that I would be preoccupied with the issue of electoral reform. Yet it is an important question and one that has been at the centre of major political debates around the world over the last decade and a half. The emergence of competitive liberal democracies in Eastern Europe – where there are now as many as in Western Europe – launched a round of questioning about how democratic elections ought to be conducted as all of those new regimes wrestled with the challenge of devising, and then fine-tuning, electoral systems. And questions of
electoral engineering have also been on the agenda of a good number of the older established democracies. The countries of the European Union have needed to adopt systems to allow them to elect members to the growing European Parliament. In the United Kingdom, a variety of electoral experiments, for London and for the new Scottish and Welsh parliaments, have made electoral institutions a major part of the significant constitutional reform agenda of the new Labour government. And several other countries have engaged in wholesale electoral reforms in an attempt to restructure or restart their electoral politics. Italy abandoned its system of proportional representation while New Zealand moved to adopt one, and Japan moved from one idiosyncratic system to another. Clearly the subject of electoral reform is much in the air, among citizens and politicians as well as the usual suspects in academic political science departments.

Electoral Reform: the Canadian ‘debate’

Now electoral reform has never been an issue to seize many Canadians. Despite the gradual evolution of a balanced set of fundamental building blocks to structure our electoral competition, ably charted in John Courtney’s fine new study for the Canadian Democratic Audit, it is fair to say that the subject has rarely appeared on the front pages of the national press. From time to time the issue has popped up in Liberal party platforms, but usually only when the party was in opposition and perplexed by that disruption to what it believed was the natural order. Once safely back in office the Liberals have given it little second thought. For obvious reasons some of our smaller opposition parties have advocated electoral reform, but they have never managed to persuade a government, or the public, that it was in their interest to change a system that regularly produced one-party majority governments.

National political parties, with ambitions to govern, take the electoral system for granted, believing it a good thing that allows them to form majority governments when divisions among the voters will not. In recent years, the Canadian Alliance and Progressive Conservatives have seen their immediate political
problem as one in which the system penalized them for being divided. Their solution was a merger in which legitimate and important differences over a range of policy areas would necessarily be compromised. An alternate perspective is that it is not the supporters of these political parties that have got it wrong, and so should cease to exist as distinctive elements in the body politic, but that a different electoral system is needed that would allow for the legitimate expression of the very differences that lead to the creation of the two different parties in the first place.

Over three decades ago my former colleague (and a distinguished Timlin lecturer) Alan Cairns published an important scholarly analysis of the impact of the electoral system on Canadian party politics. It offered a devastating critique that has structured much of our thinking about the electoral system ever since. He started by suggesting that “idealistic arguments” by advocates of proportional representation were based on “democratic fundamentalism.” Seeking to avoid that debate he simply proclaimed that he would not concern himself with that “controversy.” Instead he turned his considerable analytic lens on the impact of the electoral system as a device for stimulating and exacerbating a party politics that fostered and reinforced sectionalism and instability. Political parties, he argued, rather than being agents of compromise and national integration were responsible for aggravating sectional divisions through their campaign strategy and policy positions. They did so because the electoral system established a set of incentives that encouraged and rewarded such practices.

Cairns’ analysis was provocative and challenged our understanding of Canadian political parties: were they the benign accommodators that brokerage theory suggested, or were they, as he implied, really pernicious actors driven to foster the very divisions they then promised to ameliorate? And if the latter, could not the finger be pointed at the first-past-the-post electoral system? Those concerned with the issue of electoral reform found that Cairns’ analysis shaped the terms of the subsequent debate. While there has been no absence of proposals for reform in the years since he published his essay, most have had, at their heart, a preoccupation with curing the virus of regionalism as the central
distorting dynamic of our politics. In this they have been direct responses to Cairns' identification of the dysfunctional dimensions of the electoral system. As a result, electoral reform has largely been defined in terms of the national question: as a matter of finding a way to soften sectional conflicts and improve the capacity of national governments to respond to the imperatives of a regionally divided society. Issues of "democratic fundamentalism," a vital element in the debate over electoral systems in most other places, have been pushed out of any central position in most Canadian discussions about our basic electoral institutions.

Linking electoral reform so closely to the problems of regionalism and national integration has also had the consequence of diverting our attention from the experience of the provinces. Any analysis of the impact of the electoral system on provincial politics or provincial party systems is not likely to centre on whether it engenders a regionally divisive politics. However, even a quick reflection on provincial electoral history reminds us that Canadians have not always been committed to organizing electoral competition within the confines of a single-member plurality politics that Cairns so disapproved of. Multi-member constituencies have been used in many provinces and only recently disappeared in British Columbia, Prince Edward Island and New Brunswick. Three of the western provinces (BC, Alberta and Manitoba) experimented with different electoral formulae - using both majority-preferential and single-transferable vote systems - to elect their provincial legislatures at different times during the 20th century. However, with the debate about reforming the national electoral system centred on the 'regional disease,' little, if any, of this provincial debate and experience has made its way onto the agenda and into the argument. That is about to change.

**Electoral Reform on the Agenda**

In the past year electoral reform has suddenly appeared on the county's political agenda as never before. It is true that the new Liberal leader and Prime Minister has made the 'democratic deficit' one of his signature tunes, but Paul Martin's focus has been on what happens inside parliament, not on how parliament is
chosen, or who gets to sit in it. The Law Commission of Canada is about to issue an advocacy report calling on Canada to adopt a new Mixed-Member Proportional electoral system. But neither of these developments, however welcome they may be to reformers, seems likely to usher any immediate change in our electoral politics. As so often happens in the federation, change is coming from the ground up and starting in the provinces.

That one of the provinces might be talking about reform is perhaps not too surprising – at any time some change is probably being contemplated in one of them. What is so surprising about the past year is the decision by half of the provinces, and one of the northern territories, to suddenly put their basic electoral arrangements on the political agenda. And for several of them to do so in a way that almost certainly ensures there is going to be more than just more talk and more reports produced from the flurry of activity that has been started. Consider what has happened in the last year:

- In Prince Edward Island, a one-man Commission on Electoral Reform has recommended the province adopt a proportional electoral system. It also recommended it use a BC-style Citizens Assembly and referendum to deal with the issue.\(^5\)

- In Quebec, the newly elected government has announced it intends to introduce a Bill into the National Assembly this spring that would give the province a mixed-member electoral system.

- In New Brunswick, the newly re-elected government has appointed a nine-member Commission on Legislative Democracy whose mandate includes an injunction to recommend a more proportional electoral system.

- In Ontario, a new government has created a Democratic Renewal Secretariat, headed by a newly recruited Deputy Minister, to help fulfill its electoral pledge to consult with the people and hold a referendum on the electoral system.

- In British Columbia, a Citizens' Assembly on Electoral Reform, peopled by 160 voters drawn at random from all
over the province, has been established to study the electoral system and send any recommended changes to a provincial referendum at the time of the next election whose date is now fixed by law.

- In Yukon, the government has appointed a Senior Advisor on Electoral Reform who is charged with monitoring the BC experiment and reporting back on how the Territory might pursue its own electoral reform.

With the exception of Quebec, which has been debating the subject off and on since the first Parti québécois government appointed a Minister for Electoral Reform in 1976, these initiatives have all found themselves on their respective provincial agendas with rather little warning. No two of them are going at the problem in the same fashion, but each seems to be moving in much the same direction.

**The Basis for a Reform Agenda**

It is difficult to identify any single or simple reasons that might explain why so much of the country (the provinces involved together represent over three-quarters of the population) has rather suddenly taken up the issue. There has been no political crisis, no breakdown of traditional politics of the sort that stimulated a round of electoral reform in established democracies like Italy, Japan and New Zealand. The domestic situations facing the governments all vary: there are new governments (Quebec, Ontario and BC) but also those recently re-elected (PEI and NB); there are governments that command an overwhelming majority in their legislature (PEI and BC) and those that must watch their every move (NB); there are Liberal governments and Conservative governments; there are governments in big multi-party provinces and those in small bipolar ones. I emphasize governments here to make the point that these initiatives have all been launched by sitting governments. Though there have been a number of reform movements – the ‘Fair Vote’ organizations – working to raise awareness of the issue, it must be said that they have been easily dismissed to this point. Though political scientists have been quick to point out that
reigning politicians are normally loath to alter the very rules that have brought them to power, in each of these cases government leaders have quite consciously put electoral reform on the agenda.

Now it is true that three of the premiers who have opened the door to electoral reform first did so when in opposition. Premiers Campbell in British Columbia and McGuinty in Ontario both deliberately included the issue in their party's election manifestos, while all the parties in Quebec, including Charest's Liberals, had committed themselves to reform before the last provincial election. Still, these premiers confounded a long history of opposition parties' enthusiasm for electoral change being tempered by office as they moved aggressively to pursue the topic, even in the face of opposition from among their own supporters. Neither of the two maritime premiers made electoral reform a significant electoral issue, but both have taken action to see that it is on their province's agenda. Much the same appears to be true of the Yukon where a new government appointed a prominent Yukoner as a Senior Advisor on Electoral Reform to help kick-start change in the territory.

There appears to be no obvious common catalyst here. Each of these cases reflects a different provincial story. It is not unusual for policy demonstration effects to induce provinces to copy one another's successful innovations. But, it surely seems more than coincidental that six of our provincial-territorial jurisdictions should simultaneously take up as politically difficult and charged an issue as electoral reform. In several of the cases – British Columbia, Ontario and New Brunswick – the premier himself appears to be genuinely and personally committed to democratic reform and in the small political worlds of the provinces premiers often get what they want. Thus we should not overlook the importance of strong individual personalities in engendering change. However, it is also possible to recognize a set of general, contextual factors that appear to be driving a good deal of the impetus to changing the way we do democratic politics.

Electoral reform has been in the democratic air for a decade now in a way not seen since the years following the First World War. Some of this interest has been stimulated by the emergence of
new democracies in Eastern Europe, some by change in older established ones as they worked to reconstitute their internal politics. While provincial politicians may not spend their time following internal debates over institutional arrangements in other countries, neither are they immune to the flow of ideas carried by the scholarly and journalistic communities. Closer to home has been a growing concern for falling voter turnout rates. During the past decade, turnout in our national general elections has fallen precipitously to the point that it is not much greater than that in American presidential elections, a level long held in disdain by Canadian politicians and partisans. Less regularly noticed has been a parallel decline in average voter turnout in provincial elections: a recent estimate has it at eight percentage points lower than during the 1980s, and in three provinces the most recent election saw less than 60 per cent of the electorate appear at the polls. This sudden significant change in the electoral environment touches politicians where they live and has produced a growing concern for the health of the system. Though changing the electoral system is unlikely to reverse, or perhaps even stem, this leakage of voters, the recognition that proportional representation electoral systems typically have higher turnout rates may have been one of the forces fostering a new willingness to seriously consider electoral reform.

A second general factor is surely the failure of the political parties to make much headway in closing the gender gap in our public life. For some time now the major parties – Reform/Alliance excepted – have been committed to increasing the number of women elected to the legislatures and parliament of Canada. As Trimble and Arscott have demonstrated, they made considerable progress in the 1980s and 1990s but the proportion of women being nominated and elected appears to have plateaued, and even declined in several jurisdictions, in recent years. They argue that the evidence points to the existence of a glass ceiling so that the goal of numbers moving steadily, even if slowly, towards equality now seems out of reach. But for those unprepared to accept defeat on this significant representational issue, the electoral system presents a ready target. Much contemporary research now demonstrates that women, and other groups traditionally underrepresented in democratic legislative assemblies, are much
more successful where mixed or straight proportional electoral systems are used.\(^9\) That being the case, electoral reform is now being seen as a cure for the failures of the plurality system to provide for representational diversity and equality.

Two more explicitly political outcomes, which flow from the logic inherent in the single-member plurality system, have also contributed to a sense that it is time to reassess its ability to provide for a legitimate politics and acceptable governments. The first is its capacity to produce very unbalanced legislatures. Its propensity to reward the largest party with significant seat bonuses often stretches the distribution of partisan support in the legislatures beyond recognition. And when legislatures are small, as they are in most Canadian provinces, this may reduce the opposition to a position where it is simply unable to perform the tasks demanded of it by a properly functioning parliamentary system. This has long been one of the unacknowledged dirty secrets of provincial politics: in all the legislatures elected over the past half-century the government has controlled more than 80 percent of the seats almost one-quarter of the time, more than 70 percent in 4 out of 10 instances.\(^10\) The recent dramatic one-party sweeps—courtesy of the electoral system—in New Brunswick, Prince Edward Island and British Columbia, effectively suspended meaningful parliamentary politics in those provinces for years at a time. Electoral outcomes like these have exposed a fundamental flaw in the working of the system and lie behind a recognition that without some electoral reform the very legitimacy of the parliamentary process must be called into question. This concern alone surely explains much of the impetus to reform in Prince Edward Island, a province that has long prided itself on not rushing into hasty change.

The second set of dysfunctional political outcomes delivered by plurality systems are the so-called ‘wrong winners.’ These are the situations when one party wins the election despite receiving fewer votes than another. They are not unknown in Canada: both John Diefenbaker and Joe Clark became Prime Minister by that route and there have been cases in every province but PEI and Alberta in the last half-century. In part our sensitivity to these situations reflects a redefinition of general elections. We no longer
think of them as the sum of a series of individual contests (like the best out of seven for the Stanley Cup) but as one national contest in which the total vote share is the appropriate indication of the real winner (as if total goals over several games decided the Cup). However when the late 1990s saw wrong wins by parties in three provinces – Quebec’s Parti québécois, Saskatchewan’s NDP and BC’s NDP – these kind of outcomes began to look more like serious problems than mere occasional statistical anomalies. While it is true that two of them in little more than a decade does not seem to have moved Saskatchewan voters or politicians, the 1996 case in British Columbia contributed to shifting public opinion and stimulated the province’s Liberal party leadership to make democratic reform a significant part of its 2001 electoral platform.

Thinking about elections simply as just one big contest has no doubt spurred an interest in proportional representation. After all PR takes as its touchstone the total share of the vote a party wins and seeks to translate it into an equivalent share of the seats in a legislature. That the plurality system so manifestly fails to do so is now seen as its principal failing. Where our familiar single-member system is thought to be superior is in its capacity to provide voters with an identifiable local representative, to whom they can give their confidence, take their concerns, and on whom they can pass personal political judgment. But here is precisely where ordinary voters feel the system is failing them. Most Canadians believe it is important to have a good local MP or MLA, but a large majority now think that those elected soon lose touch with the very people who elect them. They believe that we would have better laws if MPs voted their conscience, or the wishes of their constituents, rather than buckling under to party whips, but they know that MPs have become interchangeable trained seals in Ottawa. Thus the present system is no longer being readily defended in terms of one of its supposed prime virtues.

Reform for Politics Sake

Chalked on the wall of the UBC political science building is the slogan: “‘No matter who you vote for the Government always wins.” It seems to me that the graffiti artist responsible for this
message is on to something. He or she may be reflecting the
general disaffection that is keeping young people away from the
polls in droves. But the claim is about more than that. It is a
profound complaint not about the government, and what it is or is
not doing, but about our politics and its failure to engage citizens
in a way that allows what they do to make a difference -- a
difference to their lives or to their communities. And it is in this
concern for a different kind, a better kind of politics that we can
recognize the roots of the current electoral reform debates across
the country.

The long-standing debate that Cairns started about our
electoral system almost four decades ago defined the problem as
about regionalism. The preoccupation in his analysis was on the
consequences, almost all negative, of the system’s induced politics
of regionalism for the working of Canadian government. Cairns
argued that the electoral system stimulated regional policy making
and campaigning, a polity seen and understood in regional terms,
and a sectionalism and instability at the heart of the political order.
Though described in terms of the country’s politics, the argument
was directed to explicating the dysfunctional character of this
politics for the development of a legitimate, effective government
capable of strengthening national unity. Not surprisingly the
reform proposals that followed, and consumed most of our
attention, have been preoccupied with fixing this. If only Liberals
could elect more Members in the west, or Conservatives more MPs
from Quebec, then national governments would be truly national
and public policy would be responsive to the interests of all
Canadians. But adopting PR is as likely to fragment the existing
parties along regional lines as it is to ensure better regional balance
and understanding within them. Electoral reformers’ focus on it as
a tool of better government generally ignores its more immediate
consequences for reshaping politics by changing the number and
nature of parties and the very character of electoral and
parliamentary political competition among them. Cairns himself
fell victim to this shortsightedness. In his concluding paragraph he
is to be found praising the use of proportional representation in
Belgium as a device for softening divisions between the Flemish
and the Walloons. But he had hardly put down his pen when PR
allowed Belgian parties to divide along linguistic lines and begin a long process of unravelling and hollowing out the Belgian state that continues to this day.

In the enthusiasm to fashion a new electoral system that would provide for better government there has been relatively little time for idealistic arguments of democratic fundamentalism. Elections are presented as about important matters, like producing effective stable government, not the ephemeral concerns of a fair and representative politics. With the question of how to do democracy defined as about how to do governance, it is little wonder that few outside political science were enamoured with discussions of electoral reform. Most ordinary citizens take the electoral system for granted and know little about its basic properties. When told that it is possible for a party capture a majority of the seats and form a majority government with less than half the vote, Canadians, by a 2-1 ratio, respond that this is “unfair.” And a recent IRPP study by Paul Howe and David Northrup found that a growing number of Canadians report that this feature of the electoral system is simply “unacceptable.”

What is striking about the new reform agenda is that it is about doing democracy differently by doing politics differently. The issues and arguments at the heart of the contemporary electoral reform debate are no longer about regional balance and governments' policy-making capacity. They are about how can we get more young people participating in the electoral process, about how to increase the number of women and minorities being elected to our legislatures, about how to ensure that we have a vigorous opposition that can hold the ‘friendly dictators’ that dominate our politics to account, about how we can insure that the party that wins the vote wins the election, about how to make sure that election results are fair. All these are questions about how to do politics differently. Of course they all have implications for doing government differently, but they are fundamentally questions about our politics. They provide an invitation to rethink and reform our institutional practices in terms of the ideals that we wish to see at the basis of our political life. The considerations that are being brought to bear are precisely those of democratic fundamentalism.
that Cairns sought to banish from the analysis of the impact of the electoral system.

While the formula for translating votes into seats is at the centre of a growing movement for changing the way we organize and conduct our politics it is not the only item on the democratic reform agenda. Provinces are beginning to experiment in a serious way with using citizen juries as an integral part of their policy development process. Fixed election dates are supported by a popular majority, and have now been legislated in British Columbia and put squarely on the agenda in Ontario and New Brunswick. The use of referenda to legitimate changes to political institutions is now an important part of the debate. That being so, it would appear that we have been launched into a process in which we are going to do reform differently.

*Doing reform differently*

Five of the provinces are now engaged in serious movement towards reform. Not all may make it, but it seems likely that some will. So, by the end of the next electoral cycle it is probable that several provinces will have changed their electoral systems and not necessarily in the same direction. Any changes made are bound to reflect the perceived needs of their respective political communities, but they may also reflect the somewhat different paths to reform that the provinces are taking for no two are, as yet, using the same process. The prospects for comparative study make this a political scientists dream!

Quebec has been at the subject, in one way or another, for a quarter of a century. Ministerial proposals, expert reports, government Green Papers and legislative committee hearings have all dealt with the issue and a consensus appears to have finally crystallized at a gathering of about one thousand ordinary citizens meeting as the *États Généraux* in early 2003. It recommended the adoption of a German-style Mixed-Member Proportional system and the new Liberal government, no doubt recalling its 1998 defeat despite winning the largest vote share, has announced its intention to introduce such a system in the spring of 2004. Reform will
depend on the balance of forces in the National Assembly and ultimately within the Liberal caucus. In this, the traditional concerns of elected politicians are likely to weigh heavily.

On the surface the processes in the two Maritime provinces look similar. In both, independent commissions were created by the Premier to consider various aspects of the electoral system - in PEI a distinguished judge was named a one-man commission, in NB a conventionally balanced and representative nine-person body was established. But in each case the commissions were given mandates that went beyond the traditional charge to investigate a problem. Both were specifically directed to consider alternate electoral systems and specifically proportional representation. New Brunswick's Commission on Legislative Democracy was explicitly instructed to "make recommendations on implementing a proportional representation electoral system." These are hardly the typical commission of inquiry for they are not just exploring some problem and providing wise advice. They have, in effect, been told what the solution to the problem is - electoral reform that introduces some kind of proportional representation - and their task is work out what form would be best for their immediate circumstances and how to implement it. In both cases the governments involved expect that one of the important roles of their commissions will be to take the issue out of partisan debate and mobilize support for change.

Though New Brunswick is still at an early stage of its process, the PEI commission has already reported. It recommends a Mixed Member Proportional system be adopted, but rather than calling on the government to legislate the necessary changes it argues that there needs to be a much more participatory process in the province. Besides a public education campaign and more community meetings, the commissioner recommended that the province adopt a BC-style Citizens Assembly, one of whose principal tasks would be to formulate a referendum question so that the issue could be put to the people at a general election. Having taken the issue of electoral reform out of the hands of the government, the impulse is to keep it out. If PEI is to change the way it does democratic elections, the commission believes it is for the people of the province to make that decision directly.
On the surface Ontario appears to be going about its democratic reforms in a rather backhanded fashion for it is creating a bureaucracy on democracy. Headed by a bright young academic hired for his interest in public opinion, deliberative processes and direct democracy, the government’s new Democratic Renewal Secretariat is charged with working through an agenda for change. High on its list of priorities is the electoral system and a mandate to implement the new government’s promise to consult the people and then hold a referendum on the issue. Quite how this will be done is still an open question, but like the PEI and New Brunswick processes we can see an avowed determination to mobilize opinions, involve more citizens in the debate, and then allow the electorate to make the final decision.

However it is in British Columbia where reform is being done most differently. No politicians, no commissioners. Instead a Citizens Assembly of 160 ordinary citizens has been created. The 160 – half men and half women as a result of a deliberate decision to have men’s and women’s voices heard equally, something that never happens in our legislatures – were selected at random from the voters list. And to ensure that ordinary voters would control of the process active politicians were made ineligible for membership. While Assembly members revel in the notion of being ordinary citizens there is nothing very ordinary about them at all. They have committed up to a year of their time to an intensive study of the wide range of alternative electoral systems, to attending public hearings all across the province to listen to their fellow citizens, and then to a debate to decide what they want to recommend. Their mandate allows them to either endorse the current system or to recommend a specific alternative. Their enthusiasm and willingness to do this is reinforced by the knowledge that whatever they recommend will not simply go into another report, to be taken up or ignored as the government pleases, but put to the province’s voters in a referendum on May 17, 2005 – the date of the next scheduled provincial election.

Can an assembly of 160 randomly chosen people, who come from every corner of a vast sprawling province, who reflect the diverse cultural mix of the population, whose education ranges from a basic schooling through an Oxford doctorate, and whose
life experiences range from those of a still-at-home 19-year old student to the 78 year old retired RCMP officer, really work together to master the complexities of electoral systems and come to some consensus on what is best for the province? Well the Assembly is only part way through its work but the evidence suggests that we need have no worries. It is slowly mastering the intricacies of the Single Transferable Vote, the realities of an open list PR process, the strategic implications of majoritarian formula as well as a dozen other aspects of many different electoral systems. But members have also figured out that these technical issues are really secondary. They are clearly focused on the big and important political questions. What kind of politics do they want for their province? Do they want to maintain its vigorous adversarial competition or try to move towards a more consensual coalitional style? How important is it to maintain local representatives associated with identifiable communities? Does the legislature need to be more reflective of the province’s social diversity? Should the strength of parties in the legislature better reflect the support they have amongst the electorate?

Ultimately these are value questions, and only in answering them can hard decisions be made about which electoral system might best help build the desired political community. What members of the Assembly are focused on learning is how different electoral arrangements speak to these issues. They have quickly grasped that there is going to be no simple solution for there is no perfect system, all involve potentially difficult trade-offs. They are not bringing to their work a perspective shaped by a deep knowledge of governance, or influenced by the immediate interests of partisanship. They bring a concern for politics in the broadest sense and as citizens they are wrestling with the issue of what kind of electoral institutions will help the province foster the set of political relationships they want to characterize its future.

**Doing Democracy Differently**

Electoral reform is on the agenda because an increasing number of Canadians no longer believe that the present system works in acceptable ways. They want to find a way to do
democracy differently. But this very reality creates a dilemma for it has also meant that we can no longer count on our traditional practices to produce the kind of reforms that will be seen as acceptable or as legitimate. And so to get to do democracy differently we first have to invent new ways, and establish new standards, for reforming our basic political institutions. Inevitably there is going to be a good deal of experimentation along the way.

Two features of these new processes are already taking shape. The first is that there is a significant demand for considerable participation in defining the problems, studying the issues, and creating the agenda of alternatives. Even where issues can get very detailed and technical, as electoral systems quickly can, citizens are willing to put the time and energy into doing the hard work. BC’s assembly members are giving up a year of their spare time, and absorbing the equivalent of a third year university political science course, because they believe their work can make a difference for their community. This points to the second feature of these reform processes that is important. Citizens are willing, even eager, to engage when they know that their participation might make a genuine difference. BC’s assembly members know that their work will not go into another government report to sit on another shelf in the legislative library to await some history student twenty years from now. It is going directly to the people in a referendum so that there will be a real debate and a popular decision taken. Referendums are quickly becoming the gold standard for major legitimate reform. Ironically, it was a referendum defeat – on the Charlottetown Accord – that taught the Canadian electorate that the only way they could have their way was to have a referendum that overrode the politicians and governments.

On Prince Edward Island a judge in commission reports that a referendum is needed in the province. New Brunswick’s premier has declared electoral reform would need to be legitimated by a referendum. The new Ontario premier believes he needs to act so that he can keep his election promise to hold a referendum. The British Columbia Citizens Assembly is working hard because its members know they have an opportunity to create a referendum opportunity for their fellow citizens. This spectre of a new
participatory world, animated by referendums, doesn't sit well with the defenders of traditional parliamentary processes. However it is clear that it is now time we started thinking through how we are going to manage both together, and how this marriage of representative and populist institutions is going to change our common political life. But that is the subject for another lecture...
Shirley Spafford's *No Ordinary Academics: Economics and Political Science at the University of Saskatchewan, 1910-1960* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2000) provides a wonderful account of the department, including a profile of Mabel Timlin in whose honour this lecture series is named.


The literature is considerable. See W. Irvine, *Does Canada Need a New Electoral System?* (Kingston: Queen's University institute of Intergovernmental Relations, 1979), a special issue devoted to Electoral Reform of *Policy Options* (Nov. 1997), and H. Milner, *Making Every Vote Count: reasessing Canada's electoral System* (Peterborough: Broadview Press, 1999) for classic contributions.

*Report* Prince Edward Island Electoral Reform Commission, 2003 (the Carruthers Report)

There was a reference to the issue in the NB Conservative party platform in the most recent election but the topic never became a matter of discussion during the campaign.


I am indebted to David Stewart for providing me with these figures.


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Previous Lectures in the Series