

Speaking Notes

**Why Some Voters Don't Count:
The Diminishing Canadian Democracy**

Evening Address

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It has almost become a cliché nowadays to state that our democratic system is in crisis. Political commentators of all stripes point to the fragmentation of our party system and to the severe decline in voter turnout to support their claim that the very legitimacy of our system of choosing our representatives is under siege. The fiery language of the more radical observers – who prophesise the imminent collapse of our democracy – may have allowed our more established, mainstream, political actors to dismiss their claims out of hand, but it has not, however, made their basic point any less true.

All rhetoric aside, the fact remains that an increasing number of Canadians feel alienated and disconnected from their governments. More and more Canadians fail to see themselves in a political process that in many ways has become completely detached from their reality. More and more Canadians do not find it worth their while to even go out and cast a ballot for the candidate of their choice.

In fact, a brief review of the evolution of our democratic system during the 1990s highlights a number of disturbing trends in Canadian politics today: falling voter turnout, fragmentation of the party system at the federal level, exacerbation of regional tensions, an increasingly volatile electorate, and a declining trust in government and elected officials. These dramatic changes in our political landscape led IRPP to launch in June 1999 a new research programme, entitled *Strengthening Canadian Democracy*, precisely to shed some light on the source and the implications of these new phenomena.

But why should we be concerned about falling voter turnout? Why should we take note of the fact that distrust of public officials is at an all-time high? With a health care system in crisis, unmanageably high levels of personal debt and a host of issues relating to the future of our federal system still to be addressed, why is electoral reform so important? The reason is this: if we are to move forward together to address these issues, we must be sure that Canadians have confidence in the individuals making the difficult decisions as well as in the manner in which those individuals were chosen to make them. The way we select our representatives goes to the very heart of the legitimacy of their actions.

Why are more and more Canadians turning their backs on the most basic form of democratic participation? Some have concluded that Canadians have lost their sense of civic duty and pride in our democratic process and institutions. They argue that citizens have grown cynical about politics to the point that they are disinclined to think about the greater public good and prefer to stay home on election day. The answer to this general sense of disengagement, they suggest, is to generate more civic pride and social harmony through a renewed emphasis on the teaching of history and civic responsibility in our schools and a renewed commitment to strengthening civil society.

Indifference and apathy are certain part of the explanation, but there is another, equally compelling, interpretation of what we are witnessing in our democracy. Higher levels of education and increased access to information through the media and the Internet have produced a much more sophisticated electorate that can plainly see that the act of voting, for all its symbolic importance, has in many cases little practical value.

At present, our single-member plurality system, commonly referred to as first-past-the-post, has a tendency to produce governments elected with far less than 50 percent + one of ballots cast, and

to send candidates to Ottawa often with less than 40 per cent of the vote. And while victorious political parties can usually claim that a greater number of Canadians chose them over any other party, the fact remains that in most cases the majority of Canadians did not choose to be governed by the party in power. The last provincial elections in British Columbia and Quebec resulted in a far more difficult situation in which the party that formed the government actually received fewer votes than the party that formed the official opposition.

Let us examine some of the numbers. In the 1988 federal general election, 75 per cent of eligible voters exercised their right to vote. Less than 10 years later, the level of participation in the 1997 general elections had plummeted to 67 per cent. Now, even 67 percent may encourage a favourable comparison with the levels of voter turnout south of the border. But that 67 per cent is really 67 per cent of those registered on the permanent list of electors. Moreover, the level of participation falls to approximately 52 percent when we compare turnout rates to the actual number of Canadians of legal voting age. Therefore, when we say that the present majority government was elected in 1997 with 38 per cent of the vote, we are actually talking about a majority government elected with the support of a mere 25 percent of registered voters, and less than 20 per cent of the Canadian population of legal voting age.

The single-member plurality system also has the tendency to favour regional political parties with a very focused geographical appeal to the detriment of parties whose appeal is more evenly spread across the country. For example, in the 1993 and 1997 federal general elections, the Reform Party and the Progressive Conservative Party received roughly the same amount of public support. However, that same level of support produced very different results in terms of allocation of seats in the House of Commons. With approximately 2 000 000 votes each in the 1993 election, for example, the Reform Party was able to win 52 seats and the Progressive Conservatives only 2. Each Reform seat, therefore, "cost" 49 000 votes; in contrast, a PC seat cost over 1 000 000 votes. During that same election, a Liberal seat cost even fewer votes, the Liberal Party gaining 1 seat for every 32 000 votes cast in their favour.

In contrast, had the 1993 election results been processed through a system of proportional representation (PR), that democratic exercise would have produced a Liberal minority government of 122 seats, and a much more even distribution of seats for the Opposition parties: Reform 55, PC 47, Bloc 40, and NDP 20. In many respect, that result would probably have been more reflective of the will of the electorate.

In my view, electoral reform is an idea whose time has come. Quite simply, the single-member plurality system as it stands today unduly distorts the will of the electors, manufactures majorities, and punishes weaker parties with national appeal. But what are the options?

There is, of course, the obvious choice of opting for a pure system of proportional representation, which would distribute all seats in parliament strictly according to the percentage of votes received by all parties contesting the election. While the idea certainly has some merit, as it would directly reflect the broad national will, it does present certain challenges.

First, some analysts have argued that a pure PR system would inevitably lead to minority or coalition governments because rarely (if ever) has a Canadian political party ever captured more than 50 percent of the popular vote. Governments would then have to rely on other parties to stay

in power. In some circumstances, this situation would lead to greater cross party co-operation and bargaining in policy development – as has been successfully achieved in the Federal Republic of Germany. But it also has the potential to produce a political environment plagued with weak and ineffective governments, rapid successions of cabinets and coalitions, and a general policy paralysis.

While the main points of that theoretical argument on the limits of PR are certainly debatable, that system does have certain limits when applied to the Canadian context. The Canadian federal experiment is premised on the explicit recognition of regional identities within Confederation. A pure PR system would, in essence, eliminate all possibilities of successfully expressing regional concerns or discontent through the ballot box by favouring broad national parties.

Canadian policymakers must, therefore, attempt to strike a balance between an accurate reflection of the majority will, the recognition of our regional identities, and rewarding parties who appeal to our common, pan-Canadian values and goals.

Clearly, there are many options for reform. I would like to explore two of them with you this evening. For those who favour our first-past-the-post tradition and would shy away from proportional representation, there is the option of holding run-off elections. After a general election, every riding in which no candidate received 50 per cent + one of the vote would hold a run-off election between the two candidates who received the greater number of votes. In this system, the regional dimension of our current system would be respected, while ensuring that every sitting Member of Parliament had the support of at least 50 percent of his or her constituents.

Alternatively, Canadians could consider a proposal for reform that keeps certain elements of our current system while introducing some measure of proportionality to the vote. For instance, Canadians could decide to redraw the riding map of Canada and opt for only 200 regional seats, rather than the current 301. Elections would be held as usual, and MPs would be elected in the manner they are today. But the 100 seats that had been eliminated would then be redistributed among the various political parties according to their respective percentage of the popular vote. Such a “PR top-up” would then respect regional diversity and encourage parties to cultivate broad national appeal.

In recent years, some have shied away from the issue of electoral reform because of the failures of our last two rounds of Constitutional talks. The end of the Meech Lake and Charlottetown Accords gave Canadians the impression that fundamental changes in the way we organise our democratic system would inevitably necessitate constitutional reform and, quite frankly, there was – and still is – little political will to go down that road once again. In dealing with these issues, however, we must all recognise that none of the electoral systems outlined above require amending our Constitution. An amendment to the Canada Elections Act would suffice to give Canadians the electoral system that they deserve; one that better reflects their wishes about who they want to see governing their country.

It is clear that, in designing a new electoral system, we are bound only by the limits of our own imagination. By beginning an honest debate about the alternatives to the status quo, IRPP hopes to re-engage Canadians in the political process. At their best, politics and public policy are about people and about hope. Canadians must be able to see themselves in their political process. And

if we are to give ourselves hope that we can achieve greater things together, we must restore the confidence in the act of voting. In casting a ballot, Canadians must be made to feel that they are making a difference and will be heard.

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