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About Me



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Although I am a member of Fair Vote Canada's Council at the federal level, the views expressed on this blog are my own. I have been a lawyer since 1971, an elected school trustee from 1982 to 1994, past chair of the Board of the Northumberland Community Legal Centre, and so on.

[View my complete profile](#)

Monday, December 31, 2012

Why change Fair Vote Canada's Statement of Purpose?

Fair Vote Canada members are about to vote on whether to change its Statement of Purpose. The proponents of the change, Dave Meslin's RaBIT campaign in Toronto, have published a flyer which deserves a response.

Why a referendum?

Many of Fair Vote Canada's strongest supporters are outraged by this referendum.

This should be a very exciting time. We know [70% of Canadians support proportional representation](#). We know several Liberal Party leadership candidates are looking seriously at it, and [Stephane Dion is for it](#). Many thousands want to make 2015 the last unfair election. They want to be able to say: never again will a false majority government hold all the power with only 39.6% support. **They're sick of hearing: "vote for the lesser of evils."**

So why on earth would Fair Vote Canada give advocates of a winner-take-all voting system a platform to promote their system, and a vote on whether to accept it? Why this distraction about the Alternative Vote ("Instant Runoff Vote," or "preferential ballot in single-member districts")?

FVC's strategic goal is to make the 2015 federal election about getting a mandate for electoral reform. But just at this critical moment, a handful of our members want to focus on municipal politics. They **would water down and divert our campaign for proportional representation**.

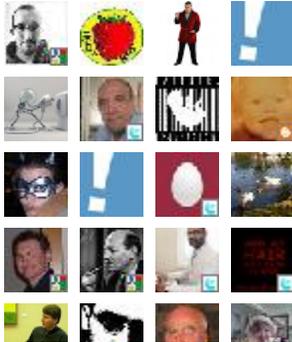
My own priority is not municipal elections. However, Dave Meslin's RaBIT campaign in Toronto has been trying (and failing) to take over Fair Vote Canada's Toronto Chapter and

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get it to support the Alternative Vote for Toronto city council elections, even though AV/IRV is just another winner-take-all voting system, not proportional at all. They keep claiming their campaign is not contrary to Fair Vote Canada's Statement of Purpose, and confusing our supporters.

This might not matter so much, but some members of the Liberal Party of Canada are promoting AV/IRV for federal elections, and the media are taking notice.

So this distraction has to be dealt with first. Then, FVC can get on with its national priority.

Contradictory goals

RaBIT (Ranked Ballot Initiative of Toronto) says we can advocate against AV for federal elections, while promoting it for Toronto city council. They say we can educate the public why AV is good for elections to a council governing a city larger than six Canadian provinces, but bad for elections in those six provinces or for federal elections.

Yet they complain that PR is not yet a top-of-mind issue for a majority of Canadians. Obviously, promoting AV will not help this; it will hurt. It's no surprise that some of RaBIT's supporters also support AV federally.

Why is Fair Vote Canada against AV federally?

Here's [why AV is not the answer](#) to Canada's democratic deficit.

FVC says "It is important to understand that preferential balloting in single-member ridings does not yield results that accurately reflect voter intentions. This system, called the Alternative Vote (AV), still violates the democratic principle of equal representation for every voter, just like our current, first past the post system. Political parties are waking up to the potential benefits that may accrue to their party in switching to a system like AV, but we need a voting system that's good for voters, not one that's good for political parties."

With just one winner in each riding, [at least half of voters don't actually elect anyone](#), and our Parliaments,

legislatures and councils don't actually look anything like us.

AV will lead to proportional representation?

RaBIT says adopting AV in Toronto would put voting reform on the map, and help raise the profile of the need for electoral reform at all levels. Sure, if you think AV at the federal level is "electoral reform." Fair Vote Canada says no. So does RaBIT, but they sound pretty confused. The fact is, AV has never led to proportional representation anywhere in the world.

Spreading anti-PR myths

RaBIT says municipal PR would require much larger wards in Toronto (where they have single-member wards) "creating a financial obstacle to running, thus reducing choice and diversity." Of course, with nothing but single-member districts, we can't have PR anywhere. The key to PR is [letting voters have more than one representative](#). As long as there's only one winner in a riding, many (even most) voters in that riding simply do not elect the candidate that best represents them, and results are not proportional.

Our opponents keep pointing to Israel's national party lists, and complain that PR means no local MPs, and means party domination. In fact, [PR for Canada means](#) some multi-member districts or regions, giving voters more diverse representation and more choice of representatives. Yet RaBIT says PR means the opposite. With allies like this, who needs enemies?

Municipally, FVC says the diversity of views and opinions among voters must be fairly represented in councils in proportion to votes cast. We must change the voting systems to enable the election of candidates with a diversity of views and opinions reflecting the diversity of views and opinions among voters.

As [Fair Vote Canada has said](#) "Actually, experience in Australia shows that AV can be even less proportional than FPTP. Turns out vote splitting is how third parties win seats." Or minority groups in municipal elections. AV guarantees that no one can win without getting 50% of the vote. No help for minorities there.

"Vote with our hearts"

One of the main reasons many Canadians want proportional representation is so that they can elect a representative of their choice. Proportional representation ends the need for so-called "strategic voting." You can vote with your heart, and your vote will count: you will elect a representative.

Yet RaBIT says "With a ranked ballot we can eliminate strategic voting and vote with our hearts" and "this allows people to vote for their true preferences rather than strategically." Nonsense: the preferential ballot is simply institutionalized strategic voting. As Fair Vote Canada has said for seven years, being represented by your second choice is the problem, not the solution. With AV/IRV, candidates of currently underrepresented voters simply get eliminated in the second or third round of counting, in favour of the two top candidates. You might feel better about being cheated of representation, by being allowed to cast a token vote for a losing candidate, but that's no real help.

Furthermore, if you want to prevent an enemy from being elected, you cast your first choice for the centrist candidate with the best chance of picking up enough votes to beat the enemy. Hold your nose, for fear she or he gets eliminated: so strategic voting is alive and well.

Single-minded support of AV

RaBIT's flyer says "there is no One-Size-Fits-All solution." Yet they insist AV is the only solution for Toronto. Fair Vote Toronto Chapter has advocated "a citizen-driven, expert-supported, review of all options for electing the Council and mayor." That's the process Fair Vote Canada always supports. But RaBIT doesn't. Yet [there are other options](#) for Toronto.

Analogies with American elections

While the USA has a two-party system, Canada has not had two parties since 1921. Electoral reformers in the USA have to embrace AV because of the two-party context. In the USA, almost every major position is a single position, such as President or Senator. Since the USA has a two-party system with no real party cohesion, AV/IRV makes sense there. The fact that AV has led to bi-polar politics in Australia doesn't bother American reformers. It bothers the hell out of me. But RaBIT's leaflet says we should copy Fair Vote USA. Even though [AV hurts thirdparties](#).

AV for Mayors

Many people like the idea of a preferential ballot for a single position like a party leader or a mayor. This referendum is explicitly about AV/IRV for municipal COUNCILS, not for mayors. Yet RaBIT tries to confuse FVC members by saying it's about mayors. [Fair Vote Canada already says](#) "Where the objective is to choose the most popular candidate for a one-person job – for example a party leader, speaker of the legislature or president – then AV is better than first-past-the-post."

Municipalities without parties?

RaBIT promotes the myth that Toronto City Council has non-partisan local elections. However, the majority of city councillors have known party affiliations and were elected with support from party machines. Very few true independents have ever been elected since the Megacity was imposed on Toronto in 1998. [As John Sewell says](#), it's time to rethink the Toronto Megacity.

FVC's objectives for local government in communities without municipal parties

The following motion has been adopted by FVC Council: "Based on the FVC Statement of Purpose, FVC's objectives for local government in communities without municipal parties are as follows:

1) To create an equal voice for every citizen, the diversity of views and opinions among voters must be fairly represented in our municipal councils in proportion to votes cast. We must change the voting systems to enable the election of candidates with a diversity of views and opinions reflecting the diversity of views and opinions among voters. Block voting (voters elect many councillors at-large by voting for all of them) often results in one group winning all the seats, leaving others voiceless.

2) Never should citizens be denied representation simply because their preferred candidate cannot win a single-member ward. A democratic voting system must encourage citizens to exercise positive choice by voting for the candidate they prefer. They should not find it necessary to

embrace negative or strategic voting – to vote for a less-preferred candidate to block the election of one even less preferred.

3) To reflect in councils the diversity of society we must change the voting system to remove barriers to the election of candidates from groups now underrepresented including women, ethnic and cultural minorities and Aboriginals."

Conclusion

Asking all voters to be represented by only one person is wrong.

As my friend Aamir Hussain says "AV for a representative body strikes directly against the core principles of Fair Vote Canada and comprises a serious challenge to the cause of Proportional Representation in Canada as a whole. After all both FPTP and AV as systems are perfectly fine with some candidate getting elected to council or parliament with 50%+1 of the vote while the rest of the electorate is treated as completely irrelevant, unimportant, and not worthy of representation. It's **those** unrepresented voters that Fair Vote Canada was built to champion and advocate for, and supporting AV for election to any sort of legislative body would be our complete abdication of that responsibility and cause. After all, going by *Rabit's own words* why would we ever choose a PR system that creates electoral districts that are too large, reduces choice and diversity of candidates, and makes it impossible for a candidate to run an independent campaign? These are all incredibly damaging and baseless claims on Proportional Representation that are made on *Rabit's own website* and they can be applied for **any** level of government. How can Fair Vote advocate for PR if, let alone respond to such attacks, it explicitly or implicitly gives them its blessing?"

Stuart Parker

For a very clear response to RaBIT, read [what Stuart Parker says](#).

Posted by Wilf Day at 2:48 AM 

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