

POLITICS AS USUAL: Electoral Reform

By Alison Collins-Mrakas

Recent elections in multiple countries have brought into stark relief the need for electoral reform. Shocking results in France, in Italy and of course the US, have raised questions about how and why we elect our governments.

The US election in particular, where Trump has emerged victorious, provides ample argument for a desperate need to rethink the 'first past the post' system of electing a leader.

(Although, really, the problem for the Americans is not just 'first past the post', it is their anachronistic Electoral College and its apportioning of votes to determine who is president, but that's fodder for a whole other discussion).

In Canada, we too are having a serious discussion about the need for electoral reform.

When Trudeau was elected to his 'majority' government, he made a bold statement that his government would be the last government elected via the 'first past the post' electoral process. However, as the Liberals are coming to realize, revamping the electoral process is not an easy undertaking.

There are a sizeable number of folks who don't want any change. And the proposed alternatives have been a bit of a hard sell as a consequence, not least of which because they can't explain what those alternatives are.

I attended the community consultation on electoral reform held by our MP. And he put up a valiant effort to describe all the various types of voting processes we could try instead of winner-takes-all. Though, as a strong proponent for the need for change, I'm familiar with much of the alternative voting methodologies, I could see that many folks in the room were very confused. This is no slight to our MP. He did a really good job of leading the discussion.

The problem is the other systems are more complicated than First Past the Post. It's that simple.

If you're going to change how folks vote, you'd better come up with a system that makes sense; a process that is as easy to understand as our current system. Right now folks understand that for better or worse the person with the most votes wins. If you can't explain proportional representation or ranked ballots as simply as that then folks won't bother to come out to vote.

And that would make things worse, not better.

Personally, I do not think First Past the Post leads to representative government; it leads to antagonistic government. If the government is the 'winner' then does that not make the opposition the losers? Given the animosity between and amongst the various parties in successive governments, having a winner and loser is not conducive to effective or good government. First past the post elections give rise to polarized political positions, where collaboration is nearly impossible. There's no incentive for cooperation or bipartisanship as the goal is not to govern but to win. At all costs.

Make no mistake, coalition governments are not a panacea. They have their own challenges as well. There will always be jockeying for power just as there will always be those who seek to serve the voters they represent and those that seek to rule them. No electoral system will erase human nature.

So much for 'government of the people, by the people and for the people.'