

POLITICS AS USUAL: They're at the Post

By Alison Collins-Mrakas

Given it is election time, focus has shifted once again to a debate on the method by which we elect our federal government, specifically the apparent inequity of the 'first-past-the-post system' we currently employ.

Right now, we have a winner-take-all kind of electoral process where the candidate with the most votes wins, and then the party with the most winning candidates wins. The leader of the 'winning' party becomes our Prime Minister. (Assuming the leader of the party has actually won a seat him/herself, which is not always a given)

That's a bit of a simplification, but that's pretty much it. For the most part, many folks think it works.

But many do not, and that's because when you look at the totality of votes - that is, the total number of votes cast for the various parties across all the ridings - the 'winning' party is often not the 'winner' at all, certainly when one looks at the percentage of votes cast for other parties.

In the last election, for example, the Conservative government formed a majority despite only 'winning' approximately 39% of the popular vote.

Further adding to the 'inequity' of the process is that we do not elect our Prime Minister. He or she becomes our Prime Minister by virtue of the fact that he or she has been selected as leader by a relatively small group of partisan political operatives at a national convention - a convention in which non-party members cannot participate. Worse still, leaders can change - and hence Prime Ministers can change - at the whim of the party, not the people.

We have witnessed this at the provincial level in Ontario. Premier McGuinty resigned in 2013 and was replaced by a party-selected Premier Wynne. A convention of Liberals chose a new leader and, by extension, a new Premier for all of us. The voting public had no say. That's our system. And many do not like it.

The first-past-the-post system makes sense if each riding was, in fact, a distinct election - or at least a contest between two candidates. But it isn't. The results of each riding are tabulated as parts of the whole. But, when tabulating the results for the country as a whole, the actual votes cast are ignored and only the results of each individual race are tabulated.

That leads to disproportionate number of seats being allocated to a party that has not in actuality managed to garner the proportion of the votes necessary to truly earn those seats. While I don't want to devolve into an essay on the algebra of politics, suffice to say that the 'math' does not make sense to me.

Supporters of the first-past-the-post system state that other methods lead to perpetual minority governments - and hence an endless cycle of elections. That's a fair criticism. Many countries that rely on coalition governments do indeed seem to be in a near constant state of election madness (Italy immediately comes to mind). However, the weaknesses of other systems do not negate the central weakness of ours - it is not representative.

I am not advocating one system over another, just recognizing that what we currently have may not be the best approach.

Perhaps it 'ain't' broke, but that doesn't mean it shouldn't be fixed.

Until next week, stay informed, stay involved because this is - after all - Our Town.