



# Electoral Justice Now!

*Liberating Democracy from an unjust electoral system, to better reflect and serve the 'Will of the People'!*

©2017 ElectoralJusticeNow.ca

## EJN Newsletter #10: Interim report card on BC's 3<sup>rd</sup> Referendum on PR

BC's third (and probably final) referendum on Proportional Representation (PR) will be held in Nov. 2018. Let's examine the performance to date of the major players, and the differences in comparison to BC's previous referenda on PR, to objectively analyze the prospects for a successful outcome.

### 1. The Political Parties:

Very unlike the two referenda on BC-STV, this 3<sup>rd</sup> referendum on PR will be a highly partisan political mud-fight. For most people this will be the greatest difference—and a huge turn-off. And responsibility for this mess is shared by all three parties.

The **NDP** minority government was enabled by their acceptance of the Greens' demand that they fulfill their campaign promise of a referendum on PR.

The **Greens** campaigned on PR without a referendum—noting that there's a natural bias that works against a referendum involving change (call it caution). Yet, despite reports after the election that the NDP were open to negotiating on the referendum, the Greens acquiesced and settled for the referendum.

The **NDP** have controlled the show ever since. Over several months, the NDP and Greens held secret meetings about PR and/or the referendum—producing their enabling legislation, and eventually announcing their very limited form of 'public consultation'. It includes a complex questionnaire about PR etc. It also specified the process as:

- (1) Interested Citizens will submit their responses;
- (2) The Attorney General's staff will summarize public input in a report to the AG;
- (3) The AG will consider the report and submit his recommendations to the Premier;
- (4) Cabinet will decide the question(s) and PR alternative(s) for the referendum;
- (5) The AG claims 'neutrality' by not participating in any of the decisions.

The **Liberals** protested the process and political motives from the outset, and their NO campaign has become a major part of their leadership contest, raising many objections:

- (1) The secret meetings between the NDP and Greens;
- (2) The inadequacy of the citizen engagement process—contrasted with their extensive study by the BC Citizens' Assembly;
- (3) The lack of neutral objectivity (again contrasted with the BCCA);
- (4) The partisan self-interest of the NDP and Greens in pursuing PR;
- (5) The Green tail wagging the NDP dog to 'rig the system' in their favour;

- (6) Claim of ‘rigging the referendum’ with a mail-in ballot likely to have low voter participation, and by lowering the standard for adoption to a simple majority (i.e. 50%+1, which the NDP government has declared to be binding), with no requirement for broad regional support;
- (7) Claim that PR would be unfair to rural voters—by shifting power to urban voters.
- (8) Claim that PR would produce endless minority governments—with political instability, indecisive governments manipulated by minority partners (i.e. ‘tail wagging the dog’), protracted periods of delays and backroom deal making to form coalition governments (e.g. Germany now, Belgium’s 500+ days etc.), ‘spaghetti’ parliaments with many fringe parties (including some radicals and loonies), lack of accountability, investor lack of confidence and adverse impact on the markets and the economy.
- (9) Claim that PR involves party lists that are undemocratic—making it very difficult for voters to remove party insiders.

This report card must acknowledge that **Liberals** have played their hand quite shrewdly in strongly opposing PR. In contrast, the NDP and Greens have given themselves huge handicaps in their campaign to promote PR, while gifting many points of valid criticism to their opponents.

## **2. The Media:**

As noted in the FVC study of lessons from previous referenda in Canada and elsewhere, the media has on balance been more helpful to the NO campaign rather than PR. The media tend to cover campaigns as ‘horse races’, spiced up with personal battles between the jockeys.

So far the Liberals have had the campaign track all to themselves, as the referendum question(s) and alternative(s) remain undetermined. Meanwhile, the Liberals have made a lot of noise and news about the race being rigged, and have scored a lot of points disparaging the motives and the methods of their opponents.

## **3. The PR Advocates and the YES campaign:**

Fair Vote Canada (FVC) and Fair Voting BC have been the organizations leading the YES campaigns in the two BC-STV referenda, and are claiming the same role again. Despite their unbroken record of failures (which in the real world of business or professional politics would demand changes), they’re still promoting the same losing alternatives (STV and MMP, with variations) and following the same campaign plan.

With only 36.9% support, MMP (Mixed Member Proportional) was crushed in Ontario in 2007. With only 39% support, STV (Single Transferable Vote) was crushed in BC in 2009. The recommended alternative in those campaigns benefited from the credibility of an objectively neutral Citizens’ Assembly—and were shielded from the blatantly partisan politicization of BC’s 2018 PR referendum.

*“Electoral Justice Now!”* is a new electoral reform advocacy group recently formed. EJN has advocated a new PR alternative that’s simpler and better, called **“Simpler-PR”**, and announced its **“Simpler PR is Better” campaign**—a winning combo!

EJN has approached FVC and FVBC with the intent of coordinating the campaigns. EJN has presented its analysis that only this new PR alternative and campaign strategy have a realistic chance of winning the referendum campaign against the formidable NO campaign that has unofficially already been launched.

The issues of campaign coordination will be determined shortly. In any case, this will be a very different campaign with EJN making the case for **Simpler-PR**. It’s based on the simple principle of making every vote count equally—by making the Citizen’s vote (rather than the Representative’s vote) the fundamental unit of Democracy, and the direct source of the voting power of each party in the legislature.

The simplicity of **Simpler-PR**, with its foundation on basic principles of Democracy, should stand out in sharp contrast to other PR alternatives, and the unprincipled political practices of the overtly partisan campaigns.

Under the spotlight of the PR referendum, EJN is optimistic that the **Simpler PR is Better** campaign will gain media recognition, and resonate with the many people who want a better PR alternative with fewer problems, and without the mud-fest of the campaigns run by the political parties.

#### **4. Framing the Issues and the Referendum campaigns:**

Electoral reform is severely restricted by the fact that the vast majority of Citizens have no knowledge or interest in voting systems—which by nature are quite confusing and boring to most people. Hence, the general public reaction to this referendum on PR will likely be to disdainfully dismiss the campaigns as partisan political bickering.

With a mail-in ballot, voter participation will probably be low—and limited to a self-interested minority. Under such circumstances, if a majority votes for PR, this result would be politically problematic and certainly challenged.

The NO campaign will be led by the Liberals, who see PR as an existential issue for them—with almost no future possibility of resuming the predominance of Liberal majority governments (with about 40% vote-share) under PR. They will do everything possible to disparage PR and those parties advocating it—and to get out the Liberal vote, as well as the ‘undecided’ who aren’t sure about PR and don’t like the process behind this referendum.

The NO campaign will appear less partisan with some high profile opponents of PR from other parties—including Bill Tieleman, former NDP strategist and leader of the successful NO campaigns against BC-STV. How unified the NDP will be on the PR referendum is uncertain—but they will most likely be less united for PR than the Liberals are against it.

The NO campaign will frame the campaign around these issues:

- (1) Fear, Uncertainty and Doubts—i.e. the standard FUD campaign against PR and its political and economic consequences.
- (2) The defects of the PR alternative(s) on the Referendum ballot—with well tested attack points to exploit the vulnerabilities of MMP and STV.
- (3) The defects of the NDP’s process behind this referendum—and the backroom deals with the Greens, as blatant partisan collusion to rig the voting system to their advantage for all time to come.

The YES campaign will once again be on the defensive, trying to argue against the negative criticisms made by the NO campaign—most of which will probably seem fairly reasonable to most Citizens.

The FVC/FVBC campaigns won’t be able to avoid getting trapped again into trying to explain how their chosen PR alternative(s) work, and trying to rationalize their defects as not being as bad as the NO campaign claims. This degenerates into the partisan dispute of ‘he-said, she-said’ noise that turns most people off.

Far worse, previous YES campaigns have never had to fight against the reality of a blatantly partisan referendum process—which is highly vulnerable to valid criticisms.

The EJM campaign intends to focus on the *electoral injustice* of FPTP. And, if **Simpler-PR** is on the ballot, it will present a very positive campaign based on the simple *principle* of ‘*making every Citizen’s vote count—equally*’, and to do so without changing the ridings, without changing how Citizens vote, and without changing the relationship with (and accountability of) their elected Representatives.

## 5. Conclusions:

This analysis presents a stark and objective picture of BC’s 2018 Referendum on PR—which merits serious consideration by the politicians and leaders of the YES campaign.

The two major PR alternatives, MMP and STV, were crushed with less than 40% support in the referendums of 2007 in Ontario and 2009 in BC—when they benefitted from the credibility and good-will of their Citizens’ Assemblies, rather than being handicapped by a highly partisan political process.

A successful referendum result would appear to require a new approach—ideally one that’s both simpler and better.

Under present circumstances, the logical conclusion is that **Simpler-PR** and the “**Simpler PR is Better**” campaign would be our best—if not only—chance to win!

The “**Simpler PR is Better**” campaign can win by reframing the main issue of the referendum campaign onto the *principle* of ‘*making every vote always count—equally*’, which **Simpler-PR** does by making the Citizen’s vote the unit of voting in the legislature.

{Refer to “[Announcing the “Simpler PR is Better” campaign](#)” for more details.}