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That  
Matter



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For the third time in the past 15 years, British Columbians are participating in a referendum, to change the way the people of the province elect a government.

In 2005, the Single Transferable Vote, or STV, was put to the people in a referendum that ran concurrently with the provincial election.

The referendum required a super majority that included approval of 60% of the voters overall, and simple majorities in 60% of the 79 districts, in order to pass. It fell short of the required 60% overall by an extremely slim margin. Four years later, STV was soundly defeated.

The current government says it's time to revisit proportional representation. It has scrapped the STV method, and is providing voters with four options, with a 50 plus one threshold, to pass. The first, is to simply keep the current system. If, however, you think it's time to change the way we elect the people who govern the province, you are then asked to rank your pick from three options.

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Bill Tieleman, of the No BC Proportional Representation Society, is adamant that the referendum proposal is a bad idea. He campaigned against it in '05, in '09, and he's once again warning voters against proportional representation.

We invited Bill Tieleman to join us for a Conversation That mMatters, about the case for no, when it comes to proportional representation.

- Welcome. On this very interesting topic, and it is very interesting having you, having been such a long-time opponent to proportional representation. What is it about proportional representation that makes you go no way.

- Well, partly, is because it's the third time in 13 years, I have to fight it. So I mean, we won it in 2005, we won in convincingly, and overwhelmingly, in 2009. - Right. - And yet, here we are again in 2013, or in 2018, doing it once again. So some people can't take no for an answer, is the obvious piece of it.

- But, do they not say, that's because it's a system that is being accepted around the world, and that it brings positive results?

- Well, there's, obviously, for people who are proponents of proportional representation, that's hard to say, who are zealots, in some ways on this, and they keep pushing it back and back. But the reality is, lots of major countries use first-past-the-post, our current system, the United Kingdom, and the United States, Canada, other countries. A number of countries, obviously, use proportional representation in many different types. But the most common one, is not on the ballot in the fall for this year, and that's proportional representation list. It's used in Holland, and many other countries, where you don't really have ridings at all, you just, you pick the party, but whatever the percentage is, that's the number of seats they get in the Parliament.

And so, you don't have ridings, you don't have geographic locations, you don't have constituents, you don't have local accountability and responsibility, all of the things that you get in first-past-the-post, which makes it a superior system in my view, and in many people's view.

- Mm-hmm, but as you say, we don't have that version of proportional representation on the ballot anyway, so we don't need to worry about that.

When you point out like Great Britain and the United States, and there are some people that would say, well first-past-the-post, there isn't producing results that we want right now. You take a look at the current President of the United States, and also the Brexit issue. There was an awful lot of misrepresentation in those campaigns.

- Yeah.

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- And we wind up with people, who in some ways you could say, are tyrannical.

- Well, two things. In the United States, they elect a president directly, we do not elect, or indirectly, through electoral college. We don't elect our premiers or prime ministers directly, we elect individual parliamentarians, individual members of legislative assembly. In each of the ridings, people decide who's the best candidate in our riding. The one who gets the most votes, goes to Parliament, or goes to Legislature, and the party or parties that have a majority then form the government.

When we see things like Donald Trump, the people who are unhappy with Donald Trump, loved Obama. So, we can't have it both ways. If you think that the electoral system should simply produce the results that you personally and politically like, then you're in the wrong business. That's not the way it should work, you should have a political electoral system that produces good results, period.

So, if you want to be unhappy with the Donald Trumps of the world, you can't say, but Obama was an aberration, and everything is bad. So that's important, I think. When you look at the UK, let's talk about the UK. In 2015, you kept the United Kingdom Independence Party under Nigel Farage. - Right. - Kind of certifiable. They ran, and they won one seat under first-past-the-post, out of 650 ridings.

They could only convince one riding, convince them to give their member a ride to the Parliament. But they got 12.5% of the vote. If it was proportional representation, they would have had 80 to 90 seats in the Parliament. They would have played a major role in the government, it would have been minority, with the UKIP party would have been in charge. Fast-forward to the next election, 2017, they got 1.5% of the vote, and no seats. So under first-past-the-post, extremists, whether they be far-right, far-left, religious, even regional, can be, cannot get the kind of grip that they have.

Whereas, we look at Austria, the Freedom Party has the third largest number of seats, formed by a former Nazi SS Officer. Most of their members of their parliament come from, not from ridings, or not responsible to local voters, they come from the party list, which is the percentage. That kind of a system, it doesn't create neo-Nazis, or far-right, or far-left extremists, but it enables them, it gives them validity, it gives them a platform. It lets other people say, oh, well, if these people who are extreme are in Parliament, it must be okay. - If we want to live in a democracy, and we want people to participate, and if we tell 'em no, if you don't get enough people behind your position, well, too bad, you're out, how does that encourage participatory democracy?

- Well, what we have is a system where you have to win a riding. You have to convince your neighbors, your community, the area where you live, that you are a reasonable person to represent them in our Legislature in Victoria. If you only need 5%, and that's the threshold the government has set, if you only need 5%, then you can have extreme views, in fact, it

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encourages extreme views, but—

- But, you're talking 5% on the one, particularly, across the board, right? - 5% across the province, yeah. So if you get 5% across the province, you will win, currently, four seats in the Legislature. That's one more, then the Green's have political balance of power. So, I—

- In a minority government, yeah.

- Yeah, yeah, but just to finish that point soon. With four seats, you could have the balance of power, and that could mean a party that is anti-indigenous people, anti-gay, anti-Muslim, anti-refugee, anti-immigrant, a whole host of different things. We see a Chilliwack's School Trustee, Mr. Neufeld, who is against all of the gay and lesbian support mechanisms in the schools. He's against all sorts of things. I say very straightforwardly, in British Columbia, I believe a party espousing extremist views could get 5% for sure, and they would have four seats on our Legislature, and they shouldn't have them.

- Do we not wind up in situation, I mean, you take a look at the first Gordon Campbell election, when the NDP were, quite literally, annihilated in the first-past-the-post system. But if you were to take a look at the total accumulation of votes, their representation and the promise is much greater than the four seats that they got.

- Mm-hmm, yeah, now it's somewhere in the 28% range.

- And do they not still represent a portion, or a perspective, that is valid, because they bounce back by the next election. And so to say, nope, sorry, you only get four seats, is not an accurate representation of what that, that whole belief and ideological political philosophy is. And then, but they get shut out. And we're hoping that Gordon Campbell's is gonna be magnanimous enough, to say, well, I'm the Premier of the entire province, and I'll take all these things into consideration. I think those days are done in politics.

- Well, here's the thing, and it's comes back to the fundamental difference between my opponents who love proportional representation, and myself, and others who want first-past-the-post. We want local, accountable representation. And what happened in 2001, was the NDP had driven itself into a very deep hole.

- Mm-hmm. - In riding after riding, people said, we don't want an NDP Government anymore, we want the BC Liberals. As is their right, they had an overall majority. So even if we hadn't had first-past-the-post, the Campbell Government would have had a massive... - Majority. - A massive majority, but. -

[Stuart] Even under proportional representation? - Even under proportional.

- Yeah. - But that would probably be the only time you've ever seen a majority government.

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So when we have a—

- Well, couldn't you have said the same in 1991? Mike Harcourt won his first government, when BC threw out the Socreds. He still would have won that with a majority.

- No, no, no, he would not have, no. The NDP has won with 40, 39, 41 and a half, 40 and a half percent of the vote. They've actually lost elections with 45, 47% of the vote. But that's the point, it's about the ridings, about the local accountable, responsible MLA to that community, and each community decides. And the fact that in one riding, let's say, West Vancouver, see this guy, maybe 80% vote BC Liberal. Should that then influence the rest of the province? I mean, I would say no, I think what we have is reasonably equal ridings, and obviously, there's northern ridings that are smaller in population of voters, because they're so far-flung. But, basically, we say we're got this representative system, so that everybody has a voice in the legislature, and out of all of those, you take the majority of ridings decides the majority in the government, not the majority of votes. And so, if we want to change that, there's a whole bunch of fundamental problems that will come of it, one of which, is Metro Vancouver will rule the parliaments even more directly, and more completely than it does right now.

- Okay, mm-hmm. But that's based on population.

- Exactly.

- And so—

- That's what proportional representation is based on, it's based on what's the percentage of the population, the votes of this party, this party, this party. And then it roughly, almost exactly, reflects that. - Okay, well, one of the proposals that's being put forward, is to have a rural-urban you know, division. One system for rural, and another for urban, to try and give a little bit more of that balance, and some sort of proportional representation to those rural ridings. - Right. - What are your thoughts on that? - Well, first of all, it's one of two systems that has never been used anywhere in the world, nowhere. Two out of the three models that the NDP Government with Green support have put forward, have never been tried anywhere. I don't like the idea of experiment, I don't like the idea of proportional representation, period, but to experiment with it, as well, seems to me the height of folly.

That said, nobody knows what riding they would be in, you don't know what your riding would be under any of the three models proposed. I don't know, no one watching this, could possibly know what riding they're gonna be in, or how many MLAs they would have in that riding. All of these details have been left out, there are no riding boundary maps. In 2009, with the Single Transferable Vote proposal proportion, we at least had riding maps. And people looked at that, and they said, wow, some of these ridings are bigger than Germany. That doesn't make any sense, that's not the way to have local representation. And it was overwhelmingly rejected by 61% of the voters. So, in this circumstance, we're saying, you

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don't get, you don't...

There's two of the models you've never seen anywhere else in the world, the third one's used in about five countries, Germany, New Zealand, most prominently, and you don't know what the boundaries are, and you don't know what the details are. You don't know how the system will actually work, you don't how many MLAs there'll be, but just vote for it, and trust us. What could go wrong?

- Well, one of the things that I find interesting about this referendum, versus the two previous ones under the Campbell Administration, is at least they put forward a plan, and they said, this is it, either you vote for it, or you don't. Right now they're saying, do you like the current system? And if you don't, well here are three choices, make your choice, the same way that you would on a proportional representation ballot, and then, we'll figure out what we're gonna do with it afterwards. Does that cause you concern?

- Enormous concern! And first of all, it's an all party committee, which they say, it's an all party committee, which means it's a Green NDP majority, NDP Green majority will decide. So that would, obviously, shut the liberals out of it, and anybody else, if they had been there, out of it, number one. Number two, I'm not going to in any way encourage anybody to vote for any of those three options. We've, in fact, called on people to boycott them, unless the Government provides the details that we need to know, of how the system would actually operate. Open list, closed list, there's a lot of very complicated and confusing details in proportional representation, what the riding boundary maps are, and how MLAs there'll be. So all those are missing, so where... I feel extremely uncomfortable with the entire thing, so we'll be calling on people to vote in favor of first-past-the-post, and if you are in favor of first-past-the-post, don't pick any of the three.

- Well, you don't anyways, if you're unfair—

- No, but you can. No, but you can, you can even put—

- Even still, I thought it was...

- No. - If you vote for first-past-the-post, you know, that's it.

- No, you can vote in favor of first-past-the-post, and then you can rank, one, two, three, the three options for proportion. So whether you vote in favor or against, you still have the opportunity to rank those models.

- Well, it seems ridiculous to do so. If you're in favor of first-past-the-post, why would you spend any time or energy—

- Maybe you think one of them is a great system, if you had to have it. But, what's worse than that, is when we get down to the actual counting of that ballot. If proportional passes, then,

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we'll have three models, and you need to get 50%. If all three have a certain percentage that's under 50, the bottom one will be dropped out, and the second choices of the people who picked the least popular method, then their second choices will be counted, and that'll what be, determine what becomes our electoral system for an indefinite period. And again, without all those details, etc. This is really, and then, what does that mean? Well, let's say we have a 30 to 40% turnout, which is quite—

- Low, but normal

- Quite, yeah. - You could be put on a mail ballot, saying I'm about. So then, if it's 21%, let's say 40%, we'll be generous. 21% vote in favor of proportional, 19% vote against. So then, out of the 21%, some fraction of that 21%, is gonna decide what our electoral system is. There is no threshold for turnout, so it doesn't matter if 10% turned out, or 100% turned out, it doesn't matter. 50% plus one, rather than a, but in the past, under, particularly if it was 2005 and 2009 referendum, it was a 60%, plus 60% of the ridings had to vote over 50% in favor. So it was sometimes called a super majority, but I would say, it's a strong consensus for change. Just like we don't change our constitution in Canada without us drawing consensus, and a lot of other things. In my Strata, I can't pass a change to the budget during the year, unless I get 75%. Even if it's to replace my boiler. But we can change our democracy with a bare minimum, and no threshold. So, we crashed it—

- Ever, and with everything that you just explained to me, you explained it so quickly, I don't have time to comprehend it, or, to make sense of it. I guess, that's what you're, in essence, inferring, and I'm implying this, and this whole system is very complicated, and very difficult to understand. - Well, what we say is, it's complicated and confusing. It also guarantees perpetual minority governments, which means instability.

In Italy they had 65 governments in 70 years, under proportional representation. In Germany, it took them five months to come up with a government. In Belgium, it took them over 500 days, to come up with a government. So we have those issues. Instability, political instability, is not good for the economy, it's not good for jobs. But people don't know who's gonna do what. We saw here in British Columbia, a little example, we've only had one minority government in 65 years, under first-past-the-post, the current government.

Andrew Weaver decides he doesn't want to go along with a lot of things the NDP wanted, even though they got over 40% of the vote, and he got 16. He says, NDP campaign promises are irrelevant. And he decides who becomes the Prime Minister, or Premier. He decides on the policies, he negotiates in a back room deal, with the NDP, exactly what they will and will not do for the confidence in supply agreement. That's what happens in proportional representation countries every single time. And when things don't go right, they do it all over again. You're taking power away from voters, and giving it to political parties. Under mixed-member proportion, one of the three systems that's proposed, the only one that's been used anywhere, 40% of the legislature will consist of party list MLAs.

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Those will be MLAs with no riding, they have no accountability or responsibility to local voters, they are simply top-ups to make the party match its percentage in the popular vote, in the legislature.

- So what's the, in that list, what's the difference between an open list and a closed list? - Okay, in an open list... Well, first of all, each party will list its priority candidates. So you can never get rid of the leader, because the top will John Horrigan, Andrew Wilkinson, and Andrew Weaver. So even if they lose their seats, they'll be at the top of the list, see that list, PR list. So then they'll go into legislature that way. But, in, whether it's regional or provincial, which hasn't been decided, the list, you can, if you have a closed list, where the party decides the order, and then the voter just votes for the party, and that's that.

- And what's your concern about that? Like, I have concerns about that. Well, hang on a second, how do I even know who I'm voting for?

- Well, you could have a list... I mean, even if it's regional, you're gonna have 10, 15, 20 people in each region. If it's provincial, you'll have, you know, up to 90, or more, because we'll probably increase our legislature to 95 MLAs. They can increase it by, it's 87 now, it could go up by eight. So, that is, I mean, it's kind of like when you look at a city council vote in Vancouver, you can have 100 people running for city council, or more. It's crazy, you can't research them all. And that's the same thing that would happen in a provincial election. So that's the closed list.

The open list, means you and I can look at this list, we decided to vote for whatever party. We can reorder it, we can take the leader, move the leader to the bottom, and move Joe Blow up to the top, and Jane Doe comes up here, and move 'em all around. That would presume that you actually knew who those people were.

- Right. - And you had strong feelings about the relative merits of each one of them, and re-ranked them. What we know from open list proportional countries, almost nobody does that, they just don't do it.

- No, you put yourself out here, in a position where you've got people who are going, I don't like you doing this, because for one thing, you're supposed to be backing our party, and we're backing this. Why is this so important to you? Because, you have brought your own critics about you, you're not doing this without some personal cost to it, to you. Why is it so important to you, that we stay with the first-past-the-post system?

- Well, I haven't changed my position, number one. I looked at it in 2005, and when the Citizens Assembly was looking at this, and I thought, oh, my God! I went down there as a journalist, and, oh, my God, these guys are actually doing this! And I thought this would be a crazy system! It was only used in Ireland, in Malta, two tiny island nations, nobody else picked it up. And I thought, this is nuts. And as I researched it more and more, I realized that

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the number of problems, the rise of extremism in Europe, particularly in the far-right, but not exclusively to that, the instability, all of those problems, as I researched more, led me to believe that first-past-the-post is the best system. It's stable, it's successful, and it's simple.

You know, I can, I just explained it in less than 20 seconds, the entire system. And you can't do that with proportional representation, in any way, shape, or form. You've got the Droop formula, you've got the weighted Gregory method, you've got all of these mathematical, you know, genius formulations, that take... Ordinary voters look at it, and this is not to insult the intelligence of a voter, at all. I have a Master's Degree in Political Science, and I have a hard time grasping some of the concepts. They are that difficult. The other side will say, oh, if you can rank ballots, you'll understand it. Well, that's not what it's about. You wanna know how the system works. You wanna know what riding you're gonna be in. How are people gonna be decided, how am I eminently gonna be chosen, the second?

I mean, for example, in bill-member proportional, one of the other systems proposed, which doesn't exist anywhere, even the Government's own report said, choosing the second MLA in that riding, will be very complicated.

- Hm-hmm. - That doesn't give me confidence.

- Okay, but let's, you know, you say you went down and took a look at it in 2005. But, you've stayed with this. There's a lot of people who fight campaigns and then move on. There's something about this, that you believe is fundamentally important to the way that we're gonna continue to govern in Canada. Why is it, that it's so important to you? - I think it's because it's local, accountable representation, and that it's an easy system for everybody to understand, and it does work. You know, as a new Democrat, I'm sorry that we didn't win for 16 years. But, we could have won in 2005, we could have won in 2009, we should have won in 2013, and we did it almost effectively within 2017.

If you look back over a period of time, the NDP has done, you know, in the last 25-30 years, they've done quite well, They haven't done as well as the liberals, but, if John Horrihan continues on this, it'll be almost even by the end of this term. So, you can't... But, I find a lot of new democrats, oh, we hated Gordon Campbell and Christy Clark, so we have to change the system. That's not what it's about. You shouldn't be changing systems to get the result you want. That doesn't, that is not... You should only change systems, if you think you've got something better. And proportional representation is worse than what we have.

- Thank you, very much.

- Thank you.