

Fair vote gives minorities a voice

BY CINDY LONG

WHAT does democracy mean to you? To me, it means that ordinary citizens vote to decide who represents them in government. Whoever gets the most votes wins the election. For many years, that was how I thought our voting system worked.

The illusion began to shatter decades ago. Watching the televised results for a provincial election, I noticed that in many ridings, the number of votes for other candidates totalled to more than the number of votes for the leading candidate. In other words, most people had not voted for the person who went to represent them in the legislature.

In 2011, the Conservative Party formed a majority federal government with only 39.6 per cent popular support. In 2015, the Liberal Party did the same thing with only 39.5 per cent popular support. If Canada is a democracy, how can one political party gain a majority government with less than 50 per cent support?

The problem is the first-past-the-post voting system we use. It distorts the results, it wastes millions of votes, and it leads to dangerous levels of partisan hostility. It's a voting system we adopted in the 1800s based on the British system at the time, and it's long past its best-before date.

Turns out there is more than one way to run a democracy, and some ways are, well, more democratic than others. Around 80 per cent of countries in the Organization for Economic Co-Operation and Development (OECD) vote using some form of proportional representation.

Under a system of proportional representation, the percentage of votes a party receives translates directly into its percentage



ONE CITY,
MANY VOICES

The Thunder Bay Anti-Racism and Equity Advisory Committee and Diversity Thunder Bay produce this monthly column to promote greater understanding of race relations in Northwestern Ontario

of seats. Forty per cent of the vote means 40 per cent of the seats in the Legislature or the House of Commons. False majorities would not be possible.

Proportional representation can create new avenues to political power for visible minorities and lower income Canadians. An analysis of candidates and elected MPs from 2015 to 2021 shows that Canada is making some progress at integrating visible minorities into the political sphere. However, our first-past-the-post system keeps this progress moving at a snail's pace.

People who feel accepted into Canadian society and into our political institutions are less likely to fall prey to fringe groups and extremist elements. Having an electoral system that empowers visible minority groups and people from all socio-economic circumstances helps strengthen our democracy.

If we had a system of proportional representation, people could vote for smaller parties knowing that their votes would count. This doesn't mean that "fringe parties" are going to "take over" our country. It does mean that we'd have a diversity of voices at the table, and stron-

ger outcomes that reflect the genuine will of more of the Canadian population. It eliminates the possibility that an extremist leader could take power with far less than 50 per cent of the vote. It means more consensual decision-making, and less ramming legislation through to flaunt partisan power. It means actual democracy.

Awareness of the need for electoral reform is growing. A recent EKOS poll showed 76 per cent of Canadians support changing how we vote.

Electoral reform is needed at every level of government. The current premier of Ontario has 100 per cent of the power with only 41 per cent of the vote. The current mayor of Thunder Bay received only 38 per cent voter support. Under a different voting system, these scenarios couldn't have happened.

First-past-the-post hurts our democracy. It often shuts out minority voices, and allows two large parties to dominate even with limited voter support. It results in false majority governments and low voter turnout as people grow disillusioned with the distorted results. Proportional representation could make it better. Visit the Fair Vote Canada website to learn more.

Cindy Long is the author of Dear Bill and One Long Journey: Deep Roots in Ontario. She is a freelance writer and content creator (radio and television ads). Her work has appeared in several newspapers, magazines, and newsletters. She's a member of Fair Vote Canada, and a supporter of Strong Towns and the Council of Canadians. Cindy was born in Toronto, and lives in Northwestern Ontario. The views and opinions expressed in this column are those of the author.