Why is electoral reform a women’s equality issue?

Famous Canadian suffragist Nellie McClung predicted that within fifty years of women obtaining the vote, women would fill fifty percent of the seats in Canada’s legislatures. Her prediction has not come true. Election after election, women are under-represented in Prince Edward Island and Canadian legislatures. After initial increases in the numbers of women politicians through the twentieth century, women now consistently make up less than a quarter of all our legislators.

However, it’s not enough just to notice that women are under-represented in decision-making. Neither is it enough to encourage individual women to run for office. Feminist analysis looks at the structures of our public institutions to determine if women are systematically disadvantaged. An analysis of the PEI electoral system clearly reveals barriers to women, and government in PEI has been slow to address these barriers.

Women’s biggest challenge has been getting their names on ballots. Because the electoral system is set up first to balance populations and geographic regions, it doesn’t allow parties or governments much flexibility to create balance between genders. Nomination processes take place district by district, unguided by a collective party strategy to increase women’s participation. In other parts of the world, electoral systems based on proportional representation frequently create opportunities and offer incentives for parties to nominate women. Because these electoral systems balance more than population and geography, they provide parties with the flexibility they need to strategize for balance between genders, too.

A local example highlights the need for reforms to decrease barriers to women’s political participation. The schedule for sittings in the PEI Legislative Assembly is based on the schedule for passenger trains that would allow rural MLAs to get to Charlottetown to take up their seats in the legislature. It has been a long time since we had trains on PEI. It has been longer still since they took passengers. It’s time to consider a schedule for sittings that accommodates contemporary realities, including women’s work schedules and the caregiving and household management tasks that still usually fall to women.

Electoral reform and legislative reform, undertaken with women’s equality in mind as a goal of reform, will reduce the systemic barriers to women. We can look to other sectors of society for examples of success. The number of women in professions has increased dramatically between 1987 and 1999: to 58% in social sciences and religion, to 49% in business and finance; to 47% of doctors and dentists. Increases occurred because women addressed the barriers to their participation. It happened because professional schools themselves recognized the necessity of creating a better gender balance and took steps to recruit and otherwise encourage women’s participation, sometimes with quota systems to ensure more equal representation. Likewise, women can’t expect their numbers in politics to increase naturally without the barriers to their participation being addressed. It is government’s responsibility to address these barriers with reforms.

What does the under-representation of women in elected office mean for issues important to women?

As we face tremendous challenges locally and globally, our communities cannot afford to lose the insights of fifty percent of citizens. Right now, under-representation of women results in lack of insight — and of priority! — on issues women have said are important to them.

Women’s organizations and other equity-seeking groups work year after year on issues including

violence against women and children, lack of access to legal aid for family law, and lack of affordable, quality early childhood care and education. Women have developed innovative and workable solutions to many of these intractable problems, but the resources never seem to find their way to these issues.

Our political system is built on social and economic networks. Democracy is built on relationships and interrelations. When women and other groups from our community are under-represented in politics and decision-making, the political system is cut off from some of the networks that it relies on to function well. More women in politics will result in more access to networks of women and women’s organizations, more access to the networks that offer solutions for the issues that women say are important.

Q  How do you know that electoral and legislative reform will help get women in government?

A  Electoral and legislative reform may not automatically result in increased representation of women in government. In 1996, the last time Prince Edward Island saw major electoral reform, the Province changed to a system of 27 single-member districts instead of 16 two-member districts, the percentage of women MLAs dropped from 25% to 15%. This drop was due to many factors, including a change of governing party. However, it might also signal that women faced more challenges than usual in being nominated in single-member districts than in double-member districts; that parties had used the two-member system to create gender balance; or that women were more likely to be squeezed out in tight nomination races, with only 27 seats to compete for, rather than 32.

This sounds a cautionary note for women intent on electoral reform, but the lesson is this: if electoral reform is going to benefit women, it must be undertaken with women’s equality as a goal. Gender-based analysis must show that there is a good chance that the reform will result in greater representation of women in decision-making. And reform must be stream-lined with community efforts to increase women’s participation in political processes.

Q  Other than under-representation of women and low priority on issues important to women, is there other evidence that the current system is not working well and needs to be reformed?

A  Other than the failing to include women and women’s priorities and failing to reflect the Island’s demographic diversity, the most obvious evidence that the current electoral system is working poorly is found in our recent history of unbalanced legislatures. Four of the last five provincial elections have returned strong majority governments, with four or fewer opposition members to hold government accountable.

Not only does the Island legislature face the challenge of functioning without effective opposition to balance government, the legislature remains dominated by two parties. These parties often focus on issues that will get them elected district by district, but they have shown little innovative vision on broad-based, province-wide issues. There is not much range in their policies and platforms. There is not much for Islanders to choose between them. As a result, the legislature fails to reflect the range of Islanders’ political perspectives. This reinforces Islanders’ cynicism that the political system will ever change — or that the political system is an effective vehicle for bringing about social change that voters want.

The clearest sign of health in our system is our high voter turnout. It’s true that Prince Edward Island has bucked the national trend of declining voter turnouts for elections. Voter turnout is usually high when elections are closely contested, and the traditional close contests between the two main Island parties create lots of incentive for voters to get out to the polls on election day. However, voter turnout tends to
be higher when people think their votes count, and it remains a fact that the current electoral system fails to count votes for second-, third-, and fourth-ranking parties. It remains a crucial question for our democracy: how long will we be able to maintain voter turnouts when so many votes don’t count?

Q

I understand the need for electoral reform, but why is the Commission on PEI’s Electoral Future recommending that PEI change to a mixed member proportional system? Why not other options?

A

The current government of Prince Edward Island limited the plebiscite options and gave the Commission on PEI’s Electoral Future a mandate to bring forward a mixed member proportional model for Islanders to vote on. However, there is some history behind government’s choice.

In 2001, the PEI legislature asked Elections PEI to prepare a report on proportional representation–based electoral systems around the world. Elections PEI presented a report to government in 2002. In 2003, the legislature appointed retired Chief Justice Norman Carruthers to the PEI Electoral Reform Commission with a mandate to do public consultation and to make recommendations regarding electoral reform.

The Carruthers Commission realized that around the world, there are many, many variations on proportional representation (PR). Each system is individual to the jurisdiction it was designed for. The best systems are the ones that best match the values of the citizens in the jurisdiction. In order to recommend a system of PR for Prince Edward Island, the Carruthers Commission researched electoral systems, considered presentations that Islanders made about electoral systems, and examined Islanders’ values.

The Commission recognized that Islanders have strong attachments to the land and their communities, and that they value having local MLAs they can call on to be accountable on local issues. From this, Norman Carruthers determined that a PR system for PEI should retain district members to represent regions and communities.

The mixed member proportional (MMP) electoral system combines proportionality and local representation by having two kinds of representatives sit in the legislative assembly: representatives elected by districts (as they are under the current PEI electoral system) and representatives elected under party lists. This mix of members allows for proportional representation — a fair balance between the proportion of popular support a party gets and the number of seats it holds — and accountability to local communities. In recent years, a number of countries with cultures and values similar to PEI have adopted MMP electoral systems, including New Zealand and Scotland.

When the Carruthers Commission on electoral reform made its report, it recommended that “The present First Past the post (FPTP) Electoral System be modified to provide an element of proportionality by electing a certain number of the members of the Legislative Assembly . . . by the FPTP system and by electing a certain number of the members of the Legislative Assembly . . . by the List System so as to provide a Mixed Member Proportional System along the lines of the New Zealand model.”

In 2005, through Motion No. 32, the Legislative Assembly established the grounds for the Commission on PEI’s Electoral Future. This commission was appointed to undertake public education about the current and proposed systems and to set a plebiscite date and a plebiscite question. They were mandated by government to work with the recommendations and models presented in the report by Norman Carruthers and the Electoral Reform Commission. In other words, they were asked by government to refine and confirm details of an MMP model, but they were not mandated to look at other electoral systems or to design models other than MMP.
The Commission on PEI’s Electoral Future includes eight individuals: one from each of the four federal ridings, one from each provincial political party, and a chair appointed by a Standing Committee of the Legislature. Due to flaws in the appointment process, only two of the eight commissioners are women. The Commission was appointed in February to prepare for a November plebiscite. They are not mandated to have a role after the plebiscite: acting on the plebiscite results will be the work of government.

**Q**

Will a mixed member proportional government lead to minority governments that can’t meet their promises or fulfill their agendas?

**A**

Under proportional representation, if the majority of voters choose a party for government, that party forms a majority government. No problem there! Why should we have an electoral system that gives a majority of seats to a party that receives less than a majority of votes, as our current electoral system does? Our current system can give the false legitimacy of a majority government to a party that receives only a plurality (say, 40%) of votes — not a true majority. And even our current electoral system does not guarantee majority governments, especially as third and fourth parties and independents gain strength and “split” the vote.

Under a proportional system, more votes count and the popular vote influences the make-up of the legislature. If voters express their diverse opinions by voting for a wider range of parties, that diversity gets reflected in the legislature, and it might result in a minority government.

Deadlock in government only occurs when legislators and parties fail to create consensus on issues that matter to citizens. Under proportional representation systems, the more diverse legislatures and more and better opposition that exist can help get the work of government done. They can hold governments accountable for the commitments they make.

And majority government may be stable, but who says they are effective and accountable? In Canada, many of our most valued programs — including Medicare, including the recent New Deal for Cities — have begun under minority governments. A 2001 survey by the Centre for Research and Information on Canada revealed that “86 percent of Canadians agree that politicians often lie to get elected.” More than 70% percent said they agreed with the statement, “I don’t think governments care very much about what people like me think.” These attitudes reveal fundamental problems with the way government works. Canadians perceive that even majority governments have been ineffective in meeting their promises and fulfilling their agendas.

In PEI Coalition for Women in Government focus groups, Island women indicated they want government that is accountable, and they want government that works based on collaboration, not just competition.

**Q**

Will a mixed member proportional electoral system give too much power to political parties?

**A**

Under the current system, political parties have a great deal of power already: for instance, they already control the nominations that women identify as a barrier to succeeding in politics. But for all their control of nominations, the district-by-district nature of nominations leaves parties with few tools other than leadership conventions to make collective decisions about who should represent their policies and their platforms. They have no way to step back, as a party, and look at their list of candidates to ensure it represents a true diversity of Islanders and Island perspectives.

Creating a party list under MMP would give them an opportunity to decide collectively, in public, the
values they want to represent on their list. In choosing their list, they can show their commitment to rural Islanders by ensuring strong rural advocates are on the list. They can demonstrate commitment to gender equality by creating policy to ensure a certain percentage of women candidates. Members of the party and members of the public can insist on direct input into parties’ creation of policy to guide their nomination processes.

Political parties are made up of people: members who make democratic choices. There are problems with the way political parties function in the Canadian democratic system. Too often, they are permitted under the Canadian system to function like private enterprises rather than public entities. And too many Canadians feel disconnected and unrepresented by parties. A new national survey by SES/Crossing Boundaries shows “almost two-thirds of Canadians said they want more opportunities to influence government decisions directly,” and this despite the fact that only 21% of respondents indicated they had ever joined a political party. Party reform needs to come, but there’s a better chance for change if there is a greater variety of political parties with political influence that better matches their popular support!

**Q**

Will proportional representation lead to “fringe” parties and one-issue parties having more influence in government?

**A**

Under the model of proportional representation Islanders are considering, a party would need 5% of the popular vote province-wide to gain just one seat in the legislature. How far to the fringes is a party that receives 5% support? In our 27-member legislature, each seat represents just 3.7% of the population!

Certainly, new parties will form and will run candidates under a proportional representation electoral system. Some of these parties might focus on one issue. Some of these parties might have wacky ideas. Some might strongly oppose policies the PEIACSW supports for increasing women’s equality in PEI. That’s democracy. We accept that there is a diverse range of political opinion in Prince Edward Island, and we hold that this diversity should be represented in the composition of the legislature, according to Islanders’ votes. This will lead to better debate — and better democracy.

**Q**

Is electoral reform just an issue for the province of Prince Edward Island?

**A**

No. Electoral reform is an issue for all governments in Canada. Prince Edward Island is one of four provinces examining proportional representation. The others looking at electoral reform options are New Brunswick, Quebec, Ontario, and British Columbia. At the federal level, the NDP has been instrumental in pressing for proportional representation for Canada. The risks inherent in the regionalized first-past-the-post electoral system are clear when we look at the contemporary Canadian Parliament, where a regional party such as the Bloc Quebecois can become Official Opposition while a broad-based national party such as the Conservative Party can gain substantial numbers of votes across the regions and still elect few representatives outside Western Canada. The consequences of divisive regionalism make themselves felt in national policy: it becomes well-nigh impossible to broker consensus on issues that matter to the whole country.

As more and more Canadians make their homes in cities, and as more government responsibilities devolve to cities, it becomes increasingly important that municipal governments also respond to citizens’ values with electoral systems that are fair and that reflect diversity, including women’s active involvement. Then, when municipalities negotiate with governments, women will be at the table, voicing their priorities.
First Nations, Métis, and Inuit women across Canada also recognize the importance of ensuring that women from their communities have an equal role in decision-making in Aboriginal governments. The governments that collaborate with Aboriginal governments have a responsibility to tangibly support women’s efforts for equal representation. In Prince Edward Island in 2004, 100% of members of the Lennox Island Band Council were women — an achievement for the history books. On the other hand, no members of the Abegweit First Nation Band Council were women. Supporting First Nations women to develop their own leadership in their communities will lead to more consistent and equal results.

**Q** What will the PEIACSW and other women’s organizations do if the result of the November plebiscite shows a minority of Islanders support proportional representation?

**A** A “no” vote by Islanders will not necessarily be an endorsement of the status quo, first-past-the-post electoral system. Many factors will influence people’s choices in the plebiscite. The November 2005 plebiscite can only measure Islanders’ attitude towards the mixed member proportional model presented by the Commission on PEI’s Electoral Future.

The PEIACSW feels strongly that electoral reform is key to a strategy to get more women in politics. We know that keeping our electoral system up to the highest international standards is the responsibility of government.

If Islanders determine that the mixed member proportional electoral system is not a good choice for PEI at this time, the PEIACSW and other women’s organizations will continue to work with parties and governments to eliminate barriers to women’s participation in politics within the limitations of the first-past-the-post system we currently vote. However, we will also continue to call on government to legislate changes to the electoral system that expand what the system counts as fair. We will continue to actively support and encourage movement towards a form of proportional representation that is acceptable to Islanders and that reflects contemporary values, including equity goals. We will continue to consult with individuals and organizations in the community to determine what model of proportional representation would work best to meet their needs as citizens and what kind of inclusive, democratic process might bring them to support PR.

**Q** Where can I find more information about electoral reform and the mixed member proportional model?

**A** The PEIACSW has created a plebiscite guide to explain how the proposed mixed member proportional system for PEI would work and how we believe it could benefit Island women. Our booklet, “What’s in PEI’s Electoral Future for Women,” is available by contacting the PEIACSW. It answers specific questions about the MMP model and the plebiscite that are not addressed in this Policy Guide.