

A place of innovation, opportunity

Two Proportional Representation options on ballot both deliver real change

The Guardian (Charlottetown) · 5 Nov 2016 · A13 · BY ANNA KEENAN

In order to help inform both Professor McKenna and the many people across our province who are eagerly following the debate that rages on these opinion pages, I'd like to address two of the five questions he raised in his November 2 piece on Dual-Member Proportional Representation, or DMP. His three other questions are answered at www.PRonPEI.vote/faq.

Before we start, we must understand that no option on the plebiscite ballot involves a significant change in the number of MLAs or the cost of the legislature. Under DMP, there would be half as many districts, with two MLAs per district rather than just one, so the overall size of the legislature, and the amount of constituency work per MLA, is roughly the same.

First, McKenna implied that DMP couldn't possibly work if a district's two MLAs are from different parties. Here, we can look to other countries with multi-member districts, and to P.E.I.'s pre-1990s history of Dual-Member districts, to know that this is not a farfetched concept.

MLAs, currently, have two roles: both to help their local constituents, and - theoretically - to represent those constituents during legislative votes. But we know that it is simply not possible for a single individual, from a single political party, to accurately reflect the diversity of views of all the constituents in that district.

And sadly, we know that when MLAs vote in the current system, party loyalty always trumps constituent representation: votes are whipped into line, and 'free votes' that could more truly represent constituents are rarely granted.

Looking at the current legislature in P.E.I., you can see that our Island is painted a Liberal red, from Summerside (District 21) to Tignish (District 27). But we know that is not a fair representation of those communities: in fact, the majority of residents in those districts voted for other parties in the 2015 election: 35 per cent voted for Progressive Conservative candidates; 10 per cent voted NDP; 6 per cent voted Green. Where is the representation, under the current First-Past-the-Post system, for those Islanders? Under DMP, each district would have two MLAs accountable to local constituents, likely from different parties.

This would better reflect the diversity within our communities, and give voters a choice of which MLA they can go to with their concerns.

Similarly, the province-wide seats of Mixed Member proportional representation ensures that all voters have access to an MLA who shares their values, who can truly represent their concerns in the legislature.

Finally, McKenna argued that we should not want P.E.I. to be the test-subject for a change in

our electoral system. Sean Graham at the University of Alberta has tested the model very extensively, by running computer simulations not only on past P.E.I. elections, but also Alberta and federal elections too. It works.

But even in the absence of such calculations, a good idea should not be thrown out simply because it is a new idea. The idea of Canada as a nation was once a new idea, too, but we started that in motion here on P.E.I. We instituted universal free public schools before other parts of British North America - we were a 'test bed' for that, and it turned out to be a good idea.

The fear of change, the fear of doing something new, leads to stagnation. It prevents societies from making progress, innovating, moving forward, and moving into the future.

Young people like myself desperately want P.E.I. to be a place of innovation and opportunity, open to new ideas. Being open to change is the sort of attitude that this province would do well to foster, if we are to attract more young professionals, creatives and entrepreneurs to revitalize the local economy and make P.E.I. a more attractive place for young people to build our lives in.

Being unwilling to try something new — however strong the evidence in favour of it — is precisely the attitude that leads to stagnation. I challenge Islanders to try something new, and vote for change in this plebiscite. The two Proportional Representation options on the ballot both deliver real change. The other three options offer more of the same: lopsided legislatures and unaccountable governments.