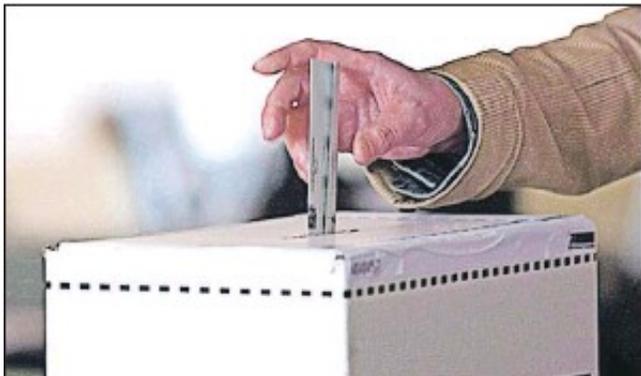


Only way to electoral reform

The Guardian (Charlottetown) · 29 Mar 2016 · A7 · BY JORDAN MACPHEE Jordan MacPhee is a student of political science and environmental studies at UPEI, a farmer, and a board member of the Environmental Coalition of Prince Edward Island (ECO-P.E.I.).

If our government truly wants to move P.E.I. beyond our outdated electoral system and into the 21st century, we must ensure strong public education on the options available to us that will get us there.



Canadians and Islanders have had enough of our current system of First Past the Post (FPTP). This is why Prime Minister Trudeau made it a part of his election campaign that 2015 would be the last unfair federal election.

We have the same opportunity here in P.E.I. Over the years, FPTP has consistently produced false majority governments, both nationally and provincially, that receive less than 50 per cent of the popular vote, more than 50 per cent of the seats, and with those seats, 100 per cent of the power to force through whatever legislation and policies they see fit.

Dual Member Proportional (DMP), or Mixed Member Proportional (MMP) are the only two real options that offer true reform.

To find out more about how these systems would work on P.E.I., you can attend the P.E.I. Coalition for Proportional Representation's workshop, Understanding DMP and MMP, taking place on Wednesday, April 6, at 6:30 at Murphy's Community Centre in Charlottetown.

If we're going to make a sincere effort at reform this time around, we'd better learn from our past mistakes made in the 2005 plebiscite on electoral reform.

Mistake #1 in 2005 was the support requirement. A "supermajority" in 2005 required both 60 per cent of the popular vote in favour of change, as well as 60 per cent of P.E.I.'s districts (16 of 27). That sort of result has only occurred once in P.E.I. history, and that was for an actual provincial election.

The solution: We must have an attainable 50-percent-plusone requirement, like we had even for the majorly contested Confederation Bridge plebiscite. I've been told that this is the plan, which is encouraging to hear.

Mistake #2 in 2005 was poor communication and conditions that reduced voter participation. In order to cut costs, 75 per cent of regular polling stations were closed on the day of the 2005 plebiscite, meaning many communities didn't have a place to vote and many people unknowingly showed up to locked doors. Polling stations that were open had such long line-ups that many people walked away in frustration before having the chance to vote.

The solution: All regular polling stations must be opened to encourage maximum public input into the process. Also, the voters list used in last May's provincial election should be used to make the process as efficient and straightforward as possible.

Mistake #3 in 2005 was when the premier became overly involved in the process. Now, this mistake has already been repeated by Premier MacLauchlan with his comments in December.

Former premier Pat Binns' disruption of the 2005 plebiscite compelled former chief justice Norman Carruthers, who was appointed as the Commissioner of Electoral Reform at the time, to criticize the premier for "tinkering with the most important and fundamental right of our democracy: the franchise," our right to vote.

The solution: Premier MacLauchlan should not use his special status as a tool to advocate for one electoral system or another.

Of course, he should be free to speak with and educate those in his own district, just like all of our MLAs should, and I encourage them to do so, but he should not use his position as Premier to unfairly sway public opinion on a matter that should be in the hands of Islanders.

By finally moving beyond FPTP, and toward some form of proportional representation, we will transform the popular vote and wishes of citizens into accurate representation in our provincial legislature, and give every Islander a voice in their community, as a liberal democracy, and Liberal governments, should aim to do.