



Rosemary Speirs "Designing a Fair Voting System" organized by the University of Toronto Law Faculty and Fair Vote Canada



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My background is in journalism, and my academic qualification—a Ph.D in history, is really of little use for today's critique of voting models. I have spent some dozen years in the Ontario Press Gallery and another ten in the National Gallery in Ottawa.

So I am going to approach today's topic from the personal point of view of a journalist who has seen a lot of politics. And also from the practical point of view of my women-in-politics organization Equal Voice, which is made up of elected members and political activists, mostly women but some men too, from all major parties.

In Equal Voice we have argued, across party lines, about ways to increase the numbers of women in elected office. Today, I am expressing my opinion only, as I have not talked to Equal Voice's executive.

If I could, I'd like to transport you all from this university hall, to sit for a moment in one of the Galleries of the 103-seat Ontario Legislature. You'd find yourself, even today, looking down on a sea of men, with a sprinkling of women, none of those women, mind you, in a leader's seat.

I find that without that birds-eye view many Canadians have no idea how huge is the gender gap in elected politics, or how pervasive the discrimination.

It is the same story federally—women are 20.7 per cent of the House of Commons—and it is the same one-fifth in all the Legislatures across the country except Quebec, and the same on our municipal councils. It is, in fact, a North American problem. In the United States only 15 per cent of Congressional seats are held by women. The two largest, arguably among the richest and most advanced countries in the world, and in this respect—equality for women at the top where it matters most—we are somewhere back in the last century.

Some of you, like June, will have seen these photographs before, but it is another way for me to drive home the point about who runs this country. Prime minister and premiers and territorial leaders. Mayors of largest cities. If what I am saying, and the photos I am displaying, seems a bit like kindergarten to an audience used to arguing about arithmetical intricacies of equalizing votes, forgive me. I do recognize and congratulate Fair Vote Canada for its success in putting voting reform on the national agenda, and for encouraging us to think about just how we'd go about it. Still I have to say, that in the models before us today—I think we are overlooking the OBVIOUS.



Electing more women IS an issue in this province, and as you go about advising the government on electoral reform, I suggest you not ignore it. We know from the poll done last year by Environics Research for the Centre for Research and Information on Canada that when Canadians were asked their highest priority for electoral reform, NINETY per cent chose increasing the number of women in elected office. The minister now responsible for democratic renewal—the Hon. Marie Boutrogianni—is concerned about the low level of women in the Legislature, and I'm pretty sure she will have fair representation for women as one of her priorities.

So I'd like to suggest to you, when considering new voting models for Ontario, that you start from the premise that just about the biggest issue before you is creating a provincial parliament that better reflects the actual makeup—and perspectives—of the WHOLE population. I think, by the way, that designing a voting system that lowers barriers to women's candidacies will help other under-represented groups as well.

Looking around the world, I find very few voting systems that—by themselves—produce more elected women. PR in almost any form is said by its proponents to improve the chances of women being elected. But, in nearly every case, and certainly in the top ten of countries with the most women in their national legislatures, what really made the difference were special provisions—quotas, zippers, party targets, twinning or financial incentives.

In general, developing countries, such as Rwanda, Afghanistan, South Africa, some South American nations, are using quotas to get women into government. In older democracies, such as Sweden, parties zipper their lists—alternating male and female candidates—and one brand new assembly Wales, has actually reached 50-50 gender parity because the political parties either twinned ridings to nominate one man and one woman for each twin, or used other affirmative action measures.

So where can we find a method that works without quotas or any other kinds of “preferential treatment”?

I think the one thing that works is media scrutiny—public scrutiny—of the slates being put up by the political parties. Under our first-past-the-post system, candidates are chosen by local riding associations with little regard for balance of representation until nominations close, when it is too late. And inevitably nearly 80 per cent of those riding associations have decided a male professional with two children is most “Winnable”

In contrast, any form of PR that involves party lists would give the media, and public, a chance to judge party slates advance. The balance of the list would be one of a party's electoral assets, and therefore would likely include women and candidates from visible minorities to attract voters from those constituencies.

But the lists won't be much better than our present riding-based nominations unless they are large lists, easy to judge. I'm not being skeptical about the media, or the public's sophistication. It is simply too much to expect people to match and judge 15 or 20 little regional lists, one list for each party with candidates in each region—maybe 40 lists in all . They won't do it.

I'd like really long lists, to keep scrutiny simple, the longer the lists the better. So called “closed” lists drawn up by party brass are said to be best for women, because female candidates can't be bumped down the lists by male “stars”. But I'd like to think it would be possible for party members to nominate who should be on the lists and elect them at province-wide party conventions.



That would lead to pressure on the parties to adopt methods such as those used by the NDP. New Democrat party leaders freeze nominations until riding associations can show a genuine search was made for a woman or representative of a minority group to be in the nomination race. This is not a quota—the so called affirmative action candidates have to win a nomination just like anyone else. But the freeze forces party associations to reach out beyond the usual male suspects. The NDP nominates a lot of women. So it works.

Unfortunately, in the three models before me, I don't see a reflection of the need to elect more women. I had hopes of Lawrence LeDuc and Azin Ghatreh Samani's paper because it is a List-PR model for Ontario, and List-PR encourages parties to put women candidates near the top and has proven favorable to the election of a "critical mass" of women representatives in Scandinavia and elsewhere.

However, the pre-occupations of LeDuc and Samani are highly proportional results between parties, geographical communities of interest, and a Legislature little bigger than the present 103 seats. I think there is a mention of diversity at some point, but nothing about electing women. And frankly, I do not see anything in the model, based as it is on districts ranging from three to eleven members, that would make much difference for women.

The Mixed Member Proportional Model proposed by Sean Geobey and Brian Tanguay, at least proposes large districts—five for Ontario—for the election of the PR seats. The preoccupations in this model are local representation through the fptp seats, recognizing natural geographic regions, and proportionality between parties and equality of votes. No mention is made of electing more women or diversity. The larger districts for the PR seats should lead to that. I couldn't tell.

Wilf Day's model—also a Mixed Member Proportional Model—is aimed he says at "proportionality, accountability and fair representation of women and minorities." So at least the fair representation issue is considered. But I find that his plan for 85 local riding MPPs and 54 regional "top-up" MPPs puts so much emphasis on "local accountability" for BOTH tiers of elected members that fair representation for women gets lost.

I could say a lot about why I think all this concern for "local accountability" of Members to their voters is nonsense—a small factor in election and re-election—but that is a separate argument. Let's concentrate on why I oppose shorter lists.

Mr. Day will say most of his regions will have 11-member lists and those are long enough to elect more women. That is based, I think, on studies in Australia that showed women did better on lists that had seven names or more. But the Australian example is confused by the fact that the Australian Labor Party set its own internal quotes—40 per cent—for the number of women candidates—and anyway Australia is hardly a world beater in electing women. Better than Canada with its 45th place ranking at electing women. But at 30th place Australia has a way to go too.

I just don't think you can expect the media, and voters, to judge the gender balance on all the party lists in Mr. Day's 13 different regions. That means we'd lose the public scrutiny that may be the strongest guarantee for electing more women in North America.

Of course, I know that gender fairness is not the only issue when building electoral reform models—that reflecting the popular party vote is very important, and ensuring workable government, --and if I may add another value you haven't mentioned, a sense of Ontarians pulling together rather than apart. I think in all three models, geographic representation has trumped the other values, including electing more women. So I would say, with all due respect for three impressive efforts, we need to go back to the drawing board.