



One Question on the Big Question *Is the Party List undemocratic?*



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From the voter's point of view, the new Mixed Member Proportional (MMP) system proposed by the Ontario Citizens' Assembly is not complex, but requires a paradigm shift: a shift in the way some people think about "their" party.

For reasons of clarity and thoroughness, it is useful to approach the "big question" in the Referendum one point at a time.

Here I would like to explain how some people perceive the "party list" candidates, how these should be understood and their function.

With the MMP system, Ontarians will vote on the left side of the ballot for a party and on the right side for the local candidate.

- 39 seats in the Legislature will be assigned from "party lists" published in advance for each party, according to the votes received on the left side of the ballots.
- 90 seats will be assigned according to the winners in each riding, as it is with the current system.

The mechanism is simple. The understanding requires a little more thought.

UNDEMOCRATIC

Some people write that “*the proposed MMP system is undemocratic*”. At first this statement sounds preposterous.

How could Australia, Japan, Germany, New Zealand and almost all the other industrialized nations in the world have an “undemocratic” system of election?

How could Canada’s system be “democratic” in their view when over 100 Liberals (out of 103 seats) represented Ontario during the three Chrétien mandates as Prime Minister?

With MMP (and other proportional systems) every vote counts and the resulting assignment of seats in the Legislature closely reflects the will of the voters expressed at election time. So how is such a statement even conceivable?

It took me a while but finally I managed to understand their point of view: What they mean is that the MMP system is undemocratic because the way **party lists** are selected is not “democratic”. Here I will address that specific question.

THE CLASSICAL VIEW

In the classical UK model of parliament you choose sides. You are with the government or with the opposition. Your side is represented by a political party. Almost every issue will be discussed from two points of view. In the UK tradition, the party represents a broad ideology. In Canada, we call these ideologies liberal or conservative.

With our current system, people try to influence their political party (by participating at leadership conventions and nomination meetings, using letters, demonstrations and petitions, calling or visiting their local MPP) in order to “*sway the party towards representing their views*”, as close as possible. People of English extraction see this process as an integral part of “democracy”. They use phrases such as: “The party should reflect the views of the people”, “Grass-root politics”, etc...

Notice that the important thing in this view is the **process**. It does not matter if the Leader of the party has the power to replace candidates “undemocratically” at will, before the election (as Chrétien did in ten ridings in Toronto in 1997). The lobbying **process** can still begin after the election.

Since candidates have little chance of being elected unless they “win” that riding, even the most hostile candidates (party hawks) will have to listen to the people or at least pretend to do that. The same people, of English extraction, define this as “**accountability**”: The obligation of a politician to reflect the will of the people.

Of course, parties can shift one way or another according to who is selected as leader and responding to pressure from voters but “big-tent” parties never fully represent any one political view.

Still many people are happy to be able to “democratically” influence “their” party to a certain extent.

THE CLASSICAL VIEW APPLIED TO ONTARIO

Let's now switch to Ontario's reality. We have three parties in the Legislature (it is not any more a two-party system) plus six other registered parties.

Let's suppose, for a moment, that each party had "democratic" leadership conventions, nomination meetings, policy meetings, etc., absolutely open to all who want to attend. (This is hypothetical, as most parties have restrictions for membership and have an approval process to run as a candidate.)

If all of the people interested in politics were involved in all of the parties, then all the parties would essentially be the same, except for their name and the colour of their logo. We would have no need for many parties. In fact, just one would suffice.

In other words, by making political parties extremely democratic, we make the political party system and the elections a farce (really undemocratic). Voters would have no real choice.

Some signs of this phenomenon are already evident in our system, as parties take opinion polls and shift to the centre of the political spectrum, to acquire more votes and "win" elections.

Quick Test: What's the difference in *ideology* or *philosophy* between Dalton McGuinty and John Tory? --- Point proven.

ANOTHER VIEW: GIVING PARTIES MORE FREEDOM

Most European countries have their electoral system rooted on a direct democracy model, spearheaded by the Republic of San Marino (the oldest constitutional republic in the world) and practiced today by the Swiss. Even San Marino today uses a purely proportional system.

All of the 45 European countries use some form of proportional system (apart from national parliamentary and local government elections in England and Wales).

No limitation is imposed on the number of political ideologies and political parties. Political parties are free to represent any opinion, of any minority.

In this view, each party (and party-list) is more reflective of a certain ideology (e.g.: communist, unionist, social credit, Christian democratic, socialist, green, libertarian, social conservative, fiscal conservative, liberal, separatist, etc.) and in that sense, each party itself is less "democratic".

However, because parties are stricter and more ideologically tied to one philosophical opinion, voters have **more** choices and **clearer** choices.

Political factions are more understandable to all. People take sides more openly, feel part of the process of government and speak about government policies more openly.

The differences between ideologies are reflected in the ballot, where more parties are listed. If the new system will be applied in Ontario, by 2011 we will probably have over a dozen parties on the left side of the ballot, each representing one ideology. People of

ONE QUESTION ON THE BIG QUESTION

non-English extraction see this abundance of choice in the ballot as an integral part of “democracy”.

In this second view, people will try **less** to influence a political party by external pressure and lobbying but will withdraw their confidence in a party by selecting another party. For example, how successful could you be in lobbying the communist party to reduce government centralization? Why would you even try, if you have other viable options that reflect your views more closely?

In fact, it is better for each party to have an uncorrupted ideology because it offers added value to the other party choices in the ballot.

PARTY-LIST ACCOUNTABILITY

The notion of “accountability to the electorate” changes within this view. A party-list politician is accountable to the electorate only inasmuch as voters can reject the whole party (and all of the party list) with their vote. However, the rejection of a whole party is much easier when the number of choices available is greater and when new parties can start and succeed faster.

In the “free market of ideas”, if a political leader finds a “political vacuum” (some ideology that could be popular but is not represented by other parties) that person can start a new “one issue” party and “test” its convictions by bringing the idea to the electorate, separately from other issues. The merit of the idea will be exactly measured by the percentage of votes obtained. Depending on the results, the party may be invited into a governing coalition or the party may disappear as fast as it started. The whole party list gains or loses according to the results at the ballot.

Party-list representatives are voted in and out depending on the number of votes received across Ontario. Thus they are accountable to all of these voters across the province, just like the leader of a party is. If the team does not perform, according to these voters, the whole team may be out at the next election.

A FREE MARKET OF IDEAS

The Free market of ideas works similarly to the free market of goods and services. Is it not a service that politicians are supposed to give society?

A political party is nothing but an organization. The “value added” of this organization is the identification and promotion of those political ideas that, in the party’s opinion, will lead to a better society. It does so by attracting politicians and members with similar views (not “democratically”, not “equally” according to gender, race or other criteria). It coordinates these peoples’ efforts. Like any other organization, a party must be efficiently managed or it may lose to the competition. It must present itself as a serious alternative to the electorate.

Who should then decide which people represent the party?

With the new system, the people who know each other within the party, who worked with each other for years, propose their party list to the electorate. They know who

ONE QUESTION ON THE BIG QUESTION

represents the party best and who the best person for a possible ministerial appointment is. New members of the party would not know. People outside the party would know even less.

Giving the power to “voters at large” to select the party list of each party would destroy the identity of all the parties!

It would be a travesty of democracy to “democratically” interfere with the task of each party to select their own representatives.

Thus, the observation raised so often that “the representatives of each party list are not chosen “democratically” is true: The system is designed to give freedom to political parties to represent **any view** they want, including minority, unpopular, “undemocratic” views, so that the voters’ **democratic right to chose** at election time is **real** and not limited.

YOUR PARTY

As a voter, once you choose your party, you are helping from “within”, you are not “out there” lobbying.

This model of **party organization** is similar to a private-enterprise model. When you work for a corporation, you need to trust that the top managers actually work efficiently with each other, to the best of their ability and are chosen for the task that fits them best. If you are not happy with someone’s leadership, either you work towards replacing him/her or you leave the corporation and go to work for someone else.

To impose a “democratic” **election** for the party list would be equivalent to running a corporation by having a democratic vote to elect its main officers. The people elected to those positions would be nice and could give a good speech, but how long would the corporation survive?

For example, to impose a “democratic” shuffle of the communist party list, to make it more “acceptable”, would make the communist party look perhaps like a socialist party. However, why would we want that, if we already have a socialist party? With proportional systems, vote-splitting is not a problem, thus combining parties is not necessary. Maintaining ideological differences, however, increases democracy by giving voters real choices.

Coalitions are created **after** the election (after voters have assigned a “power value” to each party, equivalent to the percentage of votes received), not before.

BACK TO THE PARTY LIST

Once this other concept of representative democracy is understood, then the fact that each party will include in its party list candidates who are ideologically pure, committed and disciplined, is not just acceptable but is essential.

In the current system, less democracy within a party is unhealthy. How else can a conservative influence politics if there is only one (viable) conservative party?

ONE QUESTION ON THE BIG QUESTION

But with the new system, less “democracy” within a party is healthy, because it maintains the purity of that party’s ideology and provides a new clear choice (among many) for the voter.

Most people at election time do not have the opportunity to analyze subtle differences or personalities but want simple clear choices. Is this party for or against Business? Abortion? Centralization? Privatization? More taxes? Etc.

Party-list candidates represent “at large” the party’s ideology to the people.

These lists are not to be “molded” but are to be “chosen or rejected” as a whole by voters who now have multiple party-list options to choose from and to call their own.

Riding candidates will still be there to represent local interests.

Even after understanding this party-list concept, there may be valid questions in your mind: how are party-lists going to affect the way we view elections, parties, candidates and governments?

WHICH VIEW TO CHOOSE?

The proposed MMP system is “mixed”. It allows voters the opportunity to vote for both types of candidates: the riding candidates and the party-list candidates.

However, because of the strong “proportional” formula proposed for Ontario, the choice of the system has strong repercussions on the way people will exercise their vote at election time, the way they choose “their party” and the opinion they form of their government.

The following table summarizes the effect of the party-list system with a strong proportional formula, such as the one proposed for Ontario:

ONE QUESTION ON THE BIG QUESTION

Current system	MMP system
Big-tent “party-clubs” continue to have compromised identities and wobbly leaders prone to promise anything to “win” and subject to pressure from polls, interest groups and media at election time.	Clearly identifiable parties will have more ideologically firm leaders, men of their word who consistently represent one ideology and have no need to make any promise to be elected.
The Premier continues to “play Santa Claus” at election time.	The head of a coalition government will not be able to spend public money on biased advertising at election time.
Incumbents are difficult to beat. “Career politicians” are despised, as they have created a name for themselves and cease to be “accountable to the people”.	Political parties are represented by “career politicians”. These spend a lifetime developing and defending their party’s ideology. They are difficult to dislodge.
When an elected representative does not agree with the views of the party leader, he can “cross the floor” or become an independent.	When an elected representative does not agree with the views of the party leader, if he has public support for his view, he can form a new party.
The Premier represents one riding and by-elections are needed when a party leader changes. Party leaders relocate to “safe ridings” where a large amount of money is spent for the Leader’s election.	Because party leaders are elected from the party list, the Premier represents all of Ontario and no by-elections are needed to elect new party leaders.
One party is in government without strong opposition (most of the times). Majority governments (more likely than not) will be able to unilaterally legislate. They have the power to effect change but also the power to do real damage.	Clearly identifiable parties, representing different ideologies that are not easily reconciled, will have to form a coalition government. They will share the government duty by taking the responsibility of one or more Ministries. They will be able to enact laws only when they come to some measure of consensus.
Most people hate their government (which most often represents a minority) and react by switching their allegiance to the opposite “party club” at the next election.	The government (most of the times) has little power to pass new legislation. Most people will think that the government is not very effective but most people will agree with the decisions of the governing coalition, when these are enacted.

ONE QUESTION ON THE BIG QUESTION

Current system	MMP system
<p>MPPs are accountable to those voters in their riding that elected them. Although after the election they are supposed to represent all of the people, they owe their election (and re-election) to a precious few.</p>	<p>Nothing changes for those MPPs elected in one of the ridings.</p> <p>Party-list politicians are elected with votes across Ontario, thus are accountable to all of these voters. Accordingly, their actions will be rewarded or not at the next election.</p>
<p>Candidates of the same “party club” may have conflicting ideas. If these are members of the governing party, some will be chosen for government Ministries but, others will grow old in the back-benches, even when they are very capable. The leader must select Ministers from among people who were elected as champions of local interests and for their ability to campaign, not for their specific technical or managerial experience.</p>	<p>The party list candidates will clearly represent the ideology of the party.</p> <p>The local candidates will represent local interests. Party-list candidates have the experience, knowledge and the integrity to be groomed for government Ministries. Governments will tend to be run by technocrats, experts, and respected, but “aged”, political leaders.</p>
<p>Leaders and big-tent parties legislate according to where the wind of public opinion blows.</p>	<p>Leaders will stick to their principles across multiple elections and will inspire more trust.</p>
<p>Politicians are relativists, promoting the “virtue of the middle ground.”</p>	<p>Politicians will be absolutists as far as ideology, but pragmatists after the election, as they will need to compromise on the type of legislation to be introduced and passed.</p>
<p>Voters choose a “party club.”</p>	<p>Voters choose a political ideology.</p>

Now, hopefully, we can understand both sides of the argument, on this question.

This does not mean that the two sides are equivalent. Far from it!

On October 10th, the choice is yours.