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Edmonton, AB, [REDACTED]
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Chairman
Alberta Electoral Boundaries
Commission 2009/2010
100 -- 11510 Kingsway Ave.
Edmonton, AB, T5G 2Y5

Dear sir:

I have lived in Alberta since October, 1963, voted in every provincial election, if memory serves, and I am as convinced today that election process verges on undemocratic, and obviously is unfair, as I was when I realized how the Alberta election system operated in Premier E.C. Manning's day.

I cheered vigorously and often when the right-wing, Bible-thumping, Socreds were ejected.

The most obvious failing in our election system is the disparity between the number of electors in rural ridings versus the others. Almost as grievous is that even to today, rural Alberta essentially has sway in Cabinet deliberations though apparently 80% of our population lives in what I would call urban constituencies.

Since I rate municipal government easily as the most important in the day-to-day life of the average urban Albertan, I would expect the urban viewpoint to be the primary focus of the Alberta Cabinet (as it would be with my proposed reforms).

Whereas the rural viewpoint is fairly uniform across rural Alberta because of thin population density -- I gather that 8% of Albertans are involved in agricultural pursuits -- with a narrow range of economic pursuits, and a broad consensus on "what needs to be done" such as regarding roads, utilities and policing, urban demands range down a long menu, are generally pressing and hugely costly long-term ventures, and policing and zoning, as examples, are major interests and enterprises.

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chief electoral office

It therefore follows that rural Alberta can prosper politically with a far lower ratio of legislative representatives per 100,000 electives than can urban Alberta, especially now that a rural MLA can travel efficiently year-round and communicate supremely efficiently.

I recommend three reforms, as I have recommended for years. They are:

- Reduction of the number of members of the legislature in light of what is yielded using the American House of Representatives, the nearest approximate example to Alberta of a popular legislature of centuries-long standing, as a model in this era.
- Abandonment of the first-past-the-post (FPTP) election system for the preferential vote (PF) system used for decades by the Australian House of Representatives, among other Australian legislative bodies.
- Abandonment of the present mathematics for deciding the victors in elections, for a system delivering almost precisely the same weight of vote to all voters.

The U.S. House is an admirable model because it is the second-most powerful democratic legislature on the planet after the U.S. Senate. The House has 535 legislators representing a population of 308,700,000 or an average of 577,000 people per legislator. Alberta has a population of 3,556,500 for 83 legislators (87 contemplated) for averages of 42,850 and 40,880 per legislator.

An inevitable consequence of the overload of MLAs is a needlessly large caucus, which in turn slows executive decision-making, if not at times confounding it; fewer legislators mean a smaller Cabinet, which in turn streamlines decision-making which, anyway, as social science knows, is maximized by groups no larger than 12 members – effectively, in this case a maximum Cabinet of 12. It appears there are 13 members of Cabinet today, which is close to my objective.

The Canadian House of Commons has 308 legislators for a population of 34,157,000, or one per 110,900 of population. Applied to Alberta, the Commons ratio would yield 32 MLAs, which intuition suggests to me would be close to an ideal legislature – 40 members.

In today's world, the legislator has shrunk almost to a non-entity for 95% of the population; I bet 95% of the population could not even name the local legislator. The other 5% of the population use the legislator repeatedly as a carpenter uses a hammer – to nail down the government on matters critically important to that 5% – businesspersons, various lobby leaders, people aggrieved personally by provincial government alleged failures, etc.

On the question of weighting of votes, the answer is simple. Ideally, in my scheme next described, the total of voters, not electors, would be used, but in advance of the election, the total of votes cast is not known but the total of electors is set in stone. After the election the total of voters could be used, though to the extent there was variation in voter turnouts, there might be a cause for disputing results riding to riding.

So, average the electors (not population, which is irrelevant to this) per constituency, and call it W . In an election, votes cast in a riding with E electors but fewer than W would, in the vote count, be worth E/W apiece. Votes cast in a riding with F electors but more than W would be counted as worth F/W apiece. The closer E and F were to W , the closer the actual vote weight would be to 1.

Since the vote-count serves only to decide which candidate wins a riding, the fraction aspect of my scheme does not affect the count in a riding, and need not be apparent to onlookers -- votes in all ridings would be rated as a count of 1 when being discussed such as by news announcers.

Furthermore, the "fraction vote" would only matter to the overall election outcome, which now would arise from equalizing of vote-weights, riding to riding, and would be a major reform -- in Alberta, reducing the impact in caucus of the rural vote and emphasizing, as it should, the urban vote, in both cases commensurate with riding elector totals.

And finally, the election system. The huge disadvantage of the first-past-the-post (FPTP) system is its invitation to minority interests to contest the election, leading to small caucuses in the legislature opposing the governing party's legislators.

In the extreme, which has been visited several times in recent decades in Canada, minority governments have ruled because the vote was split among three to five political parties.

But from the viewpoint of democratic process, which is all about "majority rule," FPTP's great weakness is its tendency, in many constituencies, to seat legislators who have won less than half the votes cast; in recent decades, some members of Parliament have been seated endorsed by as few as less than 35% of votes cast. Thus, in Commons votes some MPs carry the weight of at least half the voters in their ridings, while a significant percentage were *opposed* by a *majority* of votes cast. The result is that Commons votes are always carried by majorities, but they rarely have majority voter support.

In the 2008 Alberta election it appears that 30 winners were opposed by a majority of votes cast; in Calgary-Montrose, the winner was opposed by 65.5% of the voters, but thanks to FPTP, was seated in the House.

The parliamentary system which is the basis of Canada's provincial and federal governance was intended, at least in the decades in Great Britain before Confederation, to consist of a governing party, and opposing that a political party ready, willing and able, on a moment's notice, to govern if the government fell. The system was assured because only two political parties contended in elections, and many MPs were acclaimed to office; in both cases, of course, a majority of votes cast effectively endorsed the MP involved, leading to majority rule at Westminster.

The Australian system of preferential voting (PV) allows the voter to explicitly rank his or her preferences right on the ballot, but its greatest attribute is that it yields only legislators with *majority voter support*. The system is a bit complicated, but not for the voter, just for the election administrator, because two and more vote-counts may be required before a victor is declared.

The PV system discourages the seating of members of small political parties, which I rate as a distinct advantage in the parliamentary system, while not discouraging supporters of said parties from specifically ranking their choices as "1" on their ballots, and even ranking the most likely winner of a riding as last on their ballots as a strategic measure.

A final comment on FPTP is that when it yields small non-government caucuses in the legislature, that tends to turn the news media to those caucuses' leaders for comments in current government controversies, with the result that while the voters have rejected those caucuses to govern, the caucuses nevertheless end up with disproportionate ink in the newspapers, and air time in broadcasting, for their views in which voters by and large have said they wouldn't be interested. At the same time, leaders of splinter parties are inevitably only too "available" to facilitate the media's needs.

In the 2008 Alberta election, nine Liberals were elected and two New Democrats, in a field of nine political parties. The perversity of the FPTP system led to 26.4% of the voters favouring 10.8% of the legislators who were Liberals and 8.5% of the voters backing NDs who were 2% of the legislative body. The governing Conservatives, on the other hand, won 86% of the seats with but 52.7% of the vote, *or effectively were opposed by 78.4% of the electors*. Some democracy!

The message is clear: democracy took a vacation in the 2008 Alberta general election, and in fact has been on vacation since the province was created 104 years ago.

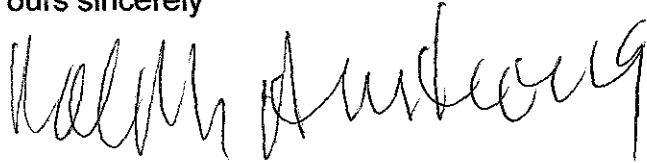
Only slightly worse than the above was the pathetic record-low 41% voter turnout for Alberta, which means 59% of those with the right to vote didn't bother, automatically allowing a small minority of the electorate to elect a majority government. It was reportedly the lowest turnout for any provincial election in Canada in 50 years, and *confirms my claim elsewhere that a relatively small fraction of Albertans pay much attention to the local MLA.*

From what I read, little will change, as cynical observers of governmental process are wont to observe.

Then, again, your little ad in the *Edmonton Journal* today did invite people to say their piece.

The fact that wrong procedures are followed in public life does not justify or authenticate them, but rather confirms that vested interests usually successfully defend their position.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Ralph Armstrong". The signature is written in a cursive, somewhat stylized script.

Ralph Armstrong

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