

December 13, 2002

Reviving Canada's Democracy: The Potential of Electoral Reform

Ottawa – Electoral reform has the potential to make our legislatures more representative, increase the presence of women and other important voices, enrich public debate, make governments more responsive and, perhaps, even bring some alienated voters back into politics.

That's the conclusion of Leslie Seidle, author of a new discussion paper from CPRN's Family Network. *Electoral System Reform in Canada* was prepared for the Law Commission of Canada. In it, Seidle reviews the latest arguments for reform, explores experience elsewhere, and examines the role of national and provincial civil society organizations in achieving change. He concludes with a realistic assessment of the impact of electoral reform in Canada.

"Many claims are made for electoral reform," says Seidle, "some of them overstated. It is important to recognize it's only one of a number of initiatives needed to improve our democracy and restore faith in our political processes."

Interest in electoral reform in Canada has historically risen when political outcomes appear unfair or unrepresentative. Seidle maintains today's renewed interest is also linked to disaffection with political institutions, declining election participation rates and a widespread sense that a person's vote doesn't count.

"Proponents of reform today argue that our institutions must reflect the true diversity of our society, must allow for greater public involvement and must result in more responsive government," Seidle says.

He assesses the potential of the most popular electoral reform model – a mixed member proportional (MMP) system. MMP would combine Canada's single member plurality (SMP, or, "first past the post") system with a system of proportional representation.

Under MMP, at least half the members of the national legislature are elected by SMP and the rest come from party lists. "List MPs" are allocated so as to ensure each party's final parliamentary presence reflects its share of the popular vote.

"MMP would maintain the constituency relationship Canadians are accustomed to, while addressing concerns about access, diversity and responsiveness," says Seidle. "But it could also reduce the likelihood of single-party majorities, place a premium on inter-party negotiation and, quite possibly, reduce the government's capacity to act decisively."

The likelihood of electoral reform, Seidle argues, depends on the creation of a “policy window” – a combination of public insistence on change and political will.

“The experience elsewhere suggests that civil society organizations play a crucial role in educating and mobilizing public opinion in favour of reform, to the point where politicians can no longer afford to ignore it.”

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