A Grandiose Prophet: Sir Sandford Fleming's Blueprint for Electoral and Parliamentary Reform, 1892

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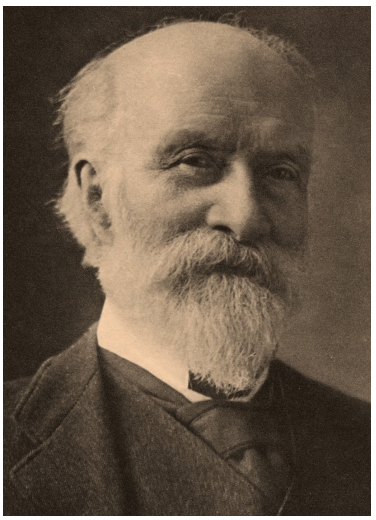
A Grandiose Prophet

James Bowden *finds in Sir Sandford Fleming's reform proposals an unpleasant authoritarian streak*

Sir Sandford Fleming was one of the greatest engineers of the 19th century. He forged steel links across British North America. He connected the British Empire together by submarine telegraph cables. And he persuaded the industrialising world to rationalise these technological revolutions in communication and transportation by adopting Time Zones and the 24-hour clock. Perhaps spurred on by these successes — and not content to rest on his laurels — Fleming focused his energies and indefatigable zeal on (of all things) electoral and parliamentary reform in Canada. The Canadian Institute, which he founded in 1849, published his "An Appeal on the Rectification of Parliament" in 1892.[1]



Throughout his pamphlet, Fleming demonstrates an eagerness to impose an exacting scientific rigour and methodical discipline on human affairs, almost as if man could be made machine. A certain self-righteousness, crypto-authoritarian, and recurring prevarication about "evils" in the current electoral system permeates his work. And of course, only *his* program would "rectify" these evils. Indeed, a kind of panic about the "evils" of "party government" and single-member plurality appears on nearly every page of his pamphlet. The shortest distance between two points being a straight line, man must likewise be made to act efficiently, preferably under the stern Calvinist tutelage of a self-taught, tee-totalling Scottish engineer. Fleming declared from the outset that he would approach electoral and parliamentary reform as a "scientific problem" through the application of engineering expertise:

> I cannot resist the impression that the examination of the facts presents a scientific problem, in no way unworthy of the consideration of the Institute [...]. It may be briefly described as an inquiry into the possibility of rectifying our electoral and parliamentary system, with the view of averting many evils now attending it, and of promoting the common happiness by terminating party conflict, and assuring political peace and freedom, by the removal of the painful and depressing influences from which we suffer.

Indeed, Fleming's proposed "rectifications" of the electoral system and the relationship between the House of Commons and Cabinet would have obliterated Responsible Government. He harbours a scornful disdain toward political parties and the interplay between government and opposition that they sustain within the House of Commons. In 1892, Fleming compiled a litany of grievances against single-member plurality and cabinet government — and prescriptions to "rectify" them through electoral and parliamentary reforms — ideas that any observer of Canadian politics from the 1990s to the 2020s would immediately recognise. The great engineer wrote the blueprints that

reforms have followed unwittingly ever since, both in terms of content and the hectoring, moralistic tone with which reformers have advocated them.

The Reformer

Fleming believed that reforming the electoral system — "the rectification of parliament" — would, in turn, necessitate corresponding reform to the structure of parliamentary government itself. He warns, "there would necessarily be a modification in the formation of the executive, and in the relation of the ministry to Parliament and the people." However, he still insists on maintaining the fundamental precepts of Responsible Government, namely that "Ministers of the Crown should have the entire confidence of the representatives of the people." He also regards the Crown as the "central authority" for appointing the political executive. But Fleming envisions a system of confirmation voting, whereby the Governor General would appoint Ministers of the Crown on the advice of the House of Commons. If Fleming were alive today, he would probably take heart that some parliamentary jurisdictions in Europe, the United Kingdom, and even here in Canada, have adopted some forms of confirmation voting. For instance, the Federal Republic Germany has constitutionally entrenched in its *Basic Law* that the President appoints the Chancellor in accordance with a confirmation vote of the Bundestag. Sweden's constitution confers this authority on the Speaker of the House rather than on the King or Queen. And under the *Scotland Act, 1998,* the Queen appoints Scotland's First Minister in accordance with a confirmation vote of the Scottish Parliament. Within Canada, the system of Consensus Government in Northwest Territories and Nunavut extends this system of confirmation voting to the rest of the political executive as well. There, the territorial Commissioner appoints both the Premier and the members of the Executive Council on and in accordance with the vote of the Legislative Assembly. Confirmation voting and constructive non-confidence complement and stabilise the lifecycles of fixed-term parliaments and make mid-parliamentary changes of government easier than early dissolution, though Fleming did not discuss constructive non-confidence and fixed-term parliaments as such. In fact, his other proposals would have made the membership of the House of Commons far less stable.

Fleming also proposes that one-fifth or one-quarter of MPs be re-elected each year, which would seem to make general elections pointless and also necessitate changing out one-fifth to one-quarter of the cabinet each year, too, under his non-partisan system. Fleming naively believes that this constant turnover and annual partial elections would guarantee that "Government and Parliament would continually be brought into direct touch with the people, and thus enabled faithfully to interpret the national mind." This impractical and absurd system would, in fact, render general elections every four or five years redundant and make capturing the "national mind" impossible. It would also paralyse cabinet government and destroy collective ministerial responsibility and cabinet solidarity, rendering the ministry extremely unstable, fractured, and indecisive. Fleming here — deliberately or not — had devised the perfect conditions for constitutional breakdown within a parliamentary system.

Fleming did not delve into proportional representation in any great detail but insisted that it would "rectify" all the "evils." He instead contented himself with late-Victorian moralising and an unshakeable belief that science and engineering could solve all social problems, concluding: "The electoral scheme of Mr. Thomas Hare, propounded in England in 1857 for the representation of minorities, appears to have met with the greatest favour." Fleming then merely attached one of Hare's pamphlets for proportional representation under a method now known as single transferable vote (STV), which relies on multi-member constituencies and a ranked ballot. After all, if the Victorians could link the Empire together by telegraph and railway and create a worldwide system of

telecommunications and transportation and trade, then they could likewise devise a voting system for the approaching 20th century.

Impressively, Fleming's pamphlet contains the germ of every other idea which has animated the advocates of proportional representation in Canada for the last 130 years. These include variants of the "wasted votes," the lament that "39% of the votes gives 100% of the power," and "policy lurch." Fleming himself did not use or create these terms and buzz-phrases, but the ideas behind them nevertheless appear in his work in principle.

Fleming laments that "the whole power of the State is absolutely possessed by a minority, and practically by an exceedingly small minority." For the last few years, proponents of electoral reform have expressed the same idea and complain that majoritarian electoral systems give one party "100% of the power" through a plurality of the popular vote. The lobby group Fair Vote Canada has fixated on "100% of the power with 39% of the vote."[2] The night of the last federal election on 21 October 2019, Elizabeth May, then leader of the Green Party, parroted Fair Vote Canada almost verbatim and warned that we must switch to some form of proportional representation. If we do not, then single-member plurality where "39% of the popular vote equals 100% of the power" will produce a fascist dictatorship in Canada:

> It [the 2019 election] must be the last election under first-past-the-post because the system we use now is dangerous. It's not just bad, it's not just flawed — it's actually dangerous. We're in an era where people I could never have imagined assume office. Groups that are generally a group of politicians referred to as populists — although I don't think that they're really populist because populism suggests that you care about the people — but bullies and quasi-fascists are coming to office based on a system in different countries that allow them to take power. Now, in Canada, a prime minister with a majority of the seats has total power. Unlike the US, we don't have separation of powers. A prime minister with a majority controls the executive and the legislative, so 39% of the popular support equals 100% of the power. We need to inoculate our democracy against a future dangerous demagogue who's able to get 100% of the power thanks to a flawed voting system of winner-take-all, riding by riding.[3]

May's fear-mongering casuistry mimics Fair Vote Canada once more, the website of which sounds the alarm that "People with extreme views exist in all western democracies" but that "Only with a winner-take-all electoral system can they gain 100% of the power with a minority of the vote."[4] Even if we take this fatuity at face value, would winning, say, 50%+1 of the popular vote and/or seats in the House of Commons and subsequently gaining "100% of the power" make May and Fair Vote Canada less nervous? Presumably, if a fascist party won 50%+1 of the popular vote under some form of proportional representation, instead of 39% under a majoritarian system and, subsequently, a majority government, Elizabeth May and Fair Vote Canada would still register their objection to fascism. By their illogic of treating power as a fraction instead of as a whole, only 100% of the votes should equal 100% of the power.

Fair Vote Canada and Elizabeth May have stated the exact opposite of the truth. In fact, majoritarian systems provide the most effective bulwark *against* totalitarianism and extremism (and have done precisely that for decades) because parties need to appeal to the median voter and broaden their bases of support in order to win elections and form government. In contrast, proportional representation makes electing fringe or extremist far-left and far-right parties much easier than under majoritarian systems: provided that any party, including those on the extremes, win the minimum threshold of the popular vote, then they win representation in the House of Commons. No fascist or communist government has ever come to power after winning a parliamentary majority under a majoritarian electoral system. Parties seeking to impose a dictatorship or one-party state usually do not bother with the rigmarole of elections anyway. Most authoritarian and totalitarian states trace their origins either to internal

coups d'état and *revolutions* or to an invasion by foreign powers where no voted at all. Weimar Germany stands out as the notable exception — except that it used proportional representation and not single-member plurality. Hitler gained 100% of the power in March 1933 even though the National Socialist German Workers' Party only won 33.09% of the popular vote in November 1932.

'Wasted Votes'

Fleming argues that "all those who do not vote with the majorities are unrepresented in Parliament." He adds, "The electors who voted for the defeated candidates, together with those who had no vote, or did not vote, remain unrepresented." This question strikes at the nature and meaning of "representation." Proponents of proportional representation define "representation" ideologically or programmatically, whereby a member of parliament can only be said to represent a constituent if he acts like a mirror and reflects his views back to him. They usually reject the idea of geographic representation entirely and thus reject the fact that any MP represents all his constituents whether they voted for him or not. Only the most foolish MP would refuse to help a constituent on the grounds that he voted for a rival candidate. Our contemporary proponents of proportional representation take the same narrow, programmatic approach to "representation" as well. The idea of a "wasted vote" also flows from the unstated and unproven premises that all votes cast should somehow always translate into electing MPs, and that citizens now possess under the *Charter* a right to vote for a winning candidate instead of the right to vote itself. In March 2016, for instance, the Broadbent Institute — a left-wing think tank and advocacy group founded by Ed Broadbent, a former leader of the New Democratic Party — released a polemical report on electoral reform entitled "An Electoral System for All: Why Canada Should Adopt Proportional Representation" and endorsed mixed-member proportional representation. The Broadbent Institute echoes Fleming and defines a "wasted vote" as any vote "cast for a candidate who didn't win."[5] Proportional representation must therefore guarantee outcomes and a pretended right to vote for a winning candidate as opposed to the right to vote in general.

'Policy Lurch'

Fleming laments that parliamentary government as we know it in the Commonwealth realms generates "the movement of the political pendulum to the other side" from one general election to another." Fleming further argues, "The consequences of these administrative revolutions is often extremely unfortunate for the country, as each party on accession to power endeavours generally to reverse as much as it can the policy of its predecessor." Contemporary technocrats denounce this same process today as "policy lurch" — the idea that successive general elections under majoritarian electoral systems often give consecutive parliamentary majorities to two different parties and that therefore the policies of the government change significantly after four or five years instead of remaining the same. Kelly Carmichael, the executive director of Fair Vote Canada in 2015, made precisely the same argument as Fleming 125 years later: "FPTP voting creates an endless cycle of policy lurch, where the new government reverses the policies of the previous government at a huge cost to citizens."[6] Seth Klein of the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives also echoed Fleming in 2018, saying: "Under FPTP, as power and false majorities swing between two main parties, each new government tends to spend a chunk of its first years essentially undoing the policies of the previous government, and so on the pendulum goes."[7] What technocrats denounce as "policy lurch" and what Fleming derided as "administrative revolutions" in fact demonstrate that majoritarian electoral systems produce governments that can respond effectively to shifting public opinion. General elections matter. The obsession against "policy lurch" is nothing more than a thinly-veiled disdain for the principle of majority rule and the collective ministerial responsibility of elected officials over the civil service.

Fleming, however, concluded that his reforms to "rectify" parliamentary government into an unrecognisable and unworkable one-party state devoid of collective ministerial responsibility "do not aim at any radical change in the constitution" on the grounds that he gives "no thought of any appeal to violence or revolution." He also maintains:

> [...] while conserving all that is good in our present constitution, and without involving any radical or revolutionary change, we could have presented to us a plan by which we would realize in our parliamentary system the true idea of representative government.

He presents his blueprint for a one-party state instead as a means of "avert[ing] any extreme convulsion and even to escape from those administrative revolutions which result on every occasion when the power passes from one party to another."[8] Curiously, when Fleming wrote this pamphlet in 1892, the last time that the party in power in Ottawa had changed occurred fourteen years earlier in 1878. In Ontario, where Fleming spent most of his life, the Liberals had by 1892 remained in power for twenty-one years, since 1871. The dreaded "policy lurches" against which Fleming asseverated were rare indeed. But on this argument, Fleming probably drew upon his own personal embitterment more than from the facts on the ground. After the early federal election of 1874, in which the electorate sustained the mid-parliamentary change of government of 1873 and gave the Liberals a majority and their own mandate, Prime Minister Alexander Mackenzie dismantled the Board of Railway Commissioners, an early Crown corporation, and transferred its authority to the Department of Public Works and a general superintendent of railways — no less a figure than Fleming's rival, Charles John Brydges. Fleming, who had surveyed the route of the Intercolonial Railway, remained as chief engineer until its completion in 1876. The Mackenzie government also reversed the Macdonald government's course on the construction of a transcontinental railway between Ontario and British Columbia — the route of which Fleming had famously surveyed.[9]

Point of Departure

But here most contemporary proponents of proportional representation part company with Fleming. He favoured STV, a form of proportional representation that combines preferential balloting and multi-member electoral districts. Since STV depends upon geographical representation (albeit with larger ridings than under single-member plurality or single-member majority), rather than on awarding seats to political parties themselves, this electoral system could theoretically operate without political parties at all and function with independent candidates alone. Fleming favoured such an outcome and believed that "each representative should feel himself unpledged, and free to speak and vote on his own clear convictions." In contrast, most prominent proponents of proportional representation in Canada today — such as the New Democratic Party, the Broadbent Institute, the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives, and the Green Party — want to award representation to political parties themselves in the House of Commons and Legislative Assemblies. As such, they advocate mixed-member proportional representation, which combines single-member plurality with pure party-list proportional representation. Voters cast two ballots or make two selections in one bifurcated ballot: one for their constituency MP and another for a political party. "Mixed-member" means that the elected assembly contains two kinds of MPs, those elected from constituencies and those elected from the party lists. But what matters is the outcome and the second half of the name: proportional representation. Parties which won a smaller percentage of ridings than their overall popular vote are awarded compensatory party-list seats until their representation in the elected assembly corresponds to their share of the popular vote. MMPR would at least preclude the possibility of a one-party state. The reformers who agree with Fleming and advocate less partisanship in Canada now tend to support the Consensus Government of Northwest Territories and Nunavut, which bans political parties altogether, while those who support a multi-party system and coalition government gravitate to MMPR.

Crypto-Totalitarianism

Fleming clearly sets out his disdain for Responsible Government from the outset of his pamphlet, declaring:

> On the one side, there is a persistent and relentless attack upon the party controlling the government; on the other, a life and death struggle for political existence. Thus we have a political peace of the community continually disturbed, and we witness, in an out of Parliament, a never-ending conflict with all its concomitant evils.

Fleming rejects the fact that politics is divisive by definition; instead, he seeks to construct a utopian system that, unfortunately for him, would quickly become paralysed and collapse into one-party rule. He argued that his system would create "a parliament [...] free from a contentious spirit" in which MPs exercise only "their highest reason." Fleming regards the "division of the people and representatives into two great parties" as an "obstacle to obtaining a true representation of the people in Parliament." Fleming has got it all backwards. He believes that political parties *cause* divisions which would not have otherwise existed; in reality, separate political parties form in response to differences of opinion and divisions which *already exist* in a free and democratic society that protects the freedoms of thought, religion, association, and expression and allows individuals to pool their interests into broader organisations. Without the disagreement and dissent that comes from persons who sincerely hold opposing views and beliefs, politics as we know it would cease to exist altogether. Political parties aggregate interests within the electorate, help voters process information about public issues, and provide vehicles for forming government — the most important reason for holding elections in the first place. This, in turn, reinforces accountability between MPs, the executive, and voters. Political parties became necessary as liberal democracies adopted universal adult suffrage and thus incorporated various different classes and interest into the democratic polity, which compete with one another during elections.[10]

In contrast, Fleming sees political parties as temporary and contingent upon specific conditions, such as the French Revolution and its aftermath. He regards the two-party system which had evolved throughout the British Empire, and in the United States, during the 18th and 19th centuries as "a rude political contrivance introduced before the reign of Queen Anne." Fleming contended that Edmund Burke only "spoke and wrote in defence of Party, at a period in history when political convulsions were impending, and the attention of the British Parliament was directed to questions of a kind to incite strong feelings" but conceded that "at that time, when, if ever, Party was justifiable and useful." Fleming continued:

> Glancing over the pages of history, it cannot be denied that a party had its good side as well as its bad in the early days of representative government. There were special objects to be attained, and questions of great importance to be settled. But great questions do not last forever, in some way there are disposed of, and one by one disappear from the political surface. If parties had depended on great questions to keep them alive, they would have long since perished, and would not to-day be known as permanent organizations.

Once more, Fleming has got it all backwards. In fact, Canadian political history (and the political history of the British Empire writ large) shows precisely the opposite: political parties remain the necessary default and offer competing ideological programs in democratic polities; they only set aside their differences temporarily during great crises and genuine emergencies. Sir Sandford Fleming should have known better and drawn lessons from the events of his own adult life. In the 1860s, for instance, the Clear Grit and Liberal reformer George Brown called a truce with his Conservative rivals Sir John A. Macdonald and Sir George-Etienne Cartier so that they could form the Great Coalition in March 1864 and bring about the Confederation of British North America. Coalition governments all formed in the United Kingdom, Canada, and

Australia during the First World War as the British Empire faced an existential threat and organised the mass mobilisation of expeditionary armies to fight Germany.

The lazy liberal-progress narrative contained in Fleming's dismissal of political parties seems tragically naive yet also strangely familiar. In 1892, he presumed that history had already settled all great political questions and thereby rendered political parties obsolete. We all agreed on the general course and now merely had to parse out and implement the details. Francis Fukuyama argued in "The End of History?" that the triumph of the liberal-democratic West and collapse of the Communist Bloc and the dissolution of the USSR had ushered the "the end-point of mankind's ideological evolution and the universalization of Western liberal democracy as the final form of human government."[11] The great political questions of the Cold War have now become obsolete. Writing precisely one hundred years after Fleming, in 1992, Fukuyama linked this grand narrative back to political parties, stating: "Moreover, in most advanced democracies, the big issues concerning governance of the community have been settled, reflected in the steady narrowing of the already narrow policy differences between political parties in the United States and elsewhere."[12] Fleming brazenly predicted that his program of proportional representation, confirmation voting, and the staggered re-election of one-fifth to one-quarter of the House of Commons each year would then begin to dissolve the "permanent cause of political conflict." Ultimately, in Fleming's vision, "the party divisions which now form a dualism in the State would disappear and practically become blended into one" — what in the 20th century would become known as a one-party State.

This end-of-history, anti-party teleology which Fleming employs finds a parallel in communist political thought and Marx's historical materialism. Under communism, only one party can act as a vanguard of the proletariat during the transitional state from capitalism toward the withering away of the State, which therefore makes a multi-party system and all other political parties illegitimate, reactionary bourgeois attempts to seize back control of the means of production and political power. Fleming, however, sought a technocracy of experts free from interfering politicians; he should have limited himself to a valid critique of the Spoils System.

Ultimately, Machiavelli proves more instructive than Marx and offers a realistic antidote to grand teleological narratives. *Fortuna* — what British Prime Minister Harold Macmillan famously called "events" — and how heads of government respond to these unforeseen quirks of fate alter the course of history. Fleming could not have known that the bloody carnage of the First World War would slaughter the *Belle Époque* and Fukuyama likewise could not foresee how the aftermath of 9/11 would shatter the tranquillity of that blissful decade between 1991 and 2001, but no one learned in history should succumb to such naive triumphalism in the first place.

In addition, the fact that Fleming dismissed political parties as relics of the 18th century and the aftermath of the French Revolution only one year after the federal election of 1891 shows an extraordinary detachment from the reality of Canadian politics. Macdonald's Conservatives fought for the National Policy and the protection of Canadian industry behind high tariff walls and, in succession, Sir Wilfrid Laurier's Liberals advocated for a return to Reciprocity (what we would today call free trade) with the United States and low tariffs. Who was Fleming to say that the choice between protectionism and free trade, and the political parties representing these traditions, mattered not? Is not protectionism vs. reciprocity one of the great questions? In fact, it mattered a great deal to the course of Canadian history from the 1860s to the 1980s, and the issue even flared up once more at the close of Fleming's lifetime in 1911 when it cost Laurier the premiership and abruptly terminated almost sixteen years of Liberal rule.

Party Conflict Essential

Responsible Government depends upon an adversarial party system and channels these energies to the Government and the Opposition within the House of Commons. The Governor General appoints a Prime Minister and other Ministers of the Crown who then take responsibility for all policies, expenditure, decisions, and the ministry must command the confidence of a majority in the House of Commons to remain in office. For its part, the Opposition presents itself to the electorate as the alternative government so that it can implement its own policies and expenditures. The Prime Minister and Cabinet govern in a way that should promote Canada's national interest; however, the Prime Minister and Cabinet most certainly cannot and do not "represent all Canadians" in the sense of "reflecting their values in government." Only the House of Commons as a whole represents all Canadians as a political nation. The loyal opposition represents "the political minority" within the Commons and makes the representation of political dissent integral to Westminster parliamentarism.[13] The government's legitimacy depends on commanding the confidence of a majority of MPs. Therefore, no Prime Minister could ever claim to represent all Canadians unless his party won all 338 seats in the House of Commons and Canada became the one-party State that Fleming envisioned. As Janet Ajzenstat states, "the supreme benefit of parliamentary government is that it protects political opposition, the right to dissent."[14] Parliamentary government thereby recognises the reality of political life in a liberal-democratic polity — where dissent and disagreement amongst citizens give rise to political parties and not the other way around — and seeks to harness the inherent conflict between political parties to the productive ends of holding the government to account and improving policy.

Parliamentary government depends upon what Fleming denounces as "party conflict." But he offers a simple engineered solution: "Let us with confidence entertain the conviction, that before longer there will be a new departure in politics; that for divisions and weakness and instability, with a long train of evils, there will be unity, and strength, and security, with proceed from wisdom, and peace, and concord." He adds: "The main object in view is to make Parliament an efficient and important engine of order and progress, so that it may perform its important national work without the bitterness and the waste of power, talent, and time, which result from party warfare." Perhaps not surprisingly, China's basic dictatorship has produced a succession of authoritarian engineers in Jiang Zemin, Hu Jintao, and Xi Jinping — and they have not permitted "party warfare" either.

In 1892, he presumed that history had already settled all great political questions and thereby rendered political parties obsolete. The great choice between protectionism and free trade mattered not.

Above all, Fleming does not understand what government is for. His crypto-totalitarian and technocratic revulsion toward the very concept of political parties flows into his misunderstanding of Responsible Government. Fleming believes that "government of the people" means not majority rule through the principles of Responsible Government (namely, in this case, that the political executive must command a majority in the House of Commons) but that the prime minister and cabinet must somehow represent all the people all the time. He states with triumphant pseudo-profundity the banal observation: "It can be conclusively shown that the minor

and government part is but a fraction of the whole, and that we are, as a matter of fact, usually governed by this fractional part." Indeed, a political party, by definition, can only represent part of the electorate — as the shared etymology of "part" and "party" makes plain. But from this, Fleming concludes that we must devise "government by the whole people, or by representatives of deputies of the whole people" by reforming the electoral system and adopting a form of proportional representation now known as STV and implementing other parliamentary reforms. Fleming bases this entire argument on conflating the legislative and executive branches, the House of Commons and Cabinet. Since only the House of Commons as a whole can be said to represent all Canadians, only if all MPs also served as cabinet ministers in a giant unity government or coalition government could Fleming's vision be achieved.

The House of Commons does not serve merely as a forum of representation but also as the body from which the government is drawn. While Ministers of the Crown derive their executive authority from the Queen, most of them (from 1867 to 2013) also served as elected members of the House of Commons, with a few Senators; since 2013, they have come exclusively from the House of Commons. Ultimately, the chief purpose of an electoral system is to form a viable government. If politicians cannot form a government after an election and instead keep the incumbent ministry in office for months as a caretaker, then the electoral system itself has failed. The Queen's business must always carry on, which means that the ministry of the day must always be able to pass supply through the Commons. If the ministry cannot control the agenda of the Commons and obtain supply for the Crown, then either there must be a new ministry through a mid-parliamentary change of government or a new parliament through dissolution and a general election. The House does not exist in order to serve parties; instead, parties evolved in our system so that the Commons could support a government.[15] However, switching to proportional representation would entrench and encourage the disaggregation of interests in the form of multiple political parties which, on their own, have no hope of ever forming government.[16] At best, they can only effect change by exercising disproportionate influence in a minority parliament or within a coalition government. Proportional representation thus serves the interests of small parties which in minority parliaments can extort demands from a government in exchange for their support.

Recent research by American political scientists Ian Shapiro, Frances McCall Rosenthal, and Christian Salas of Yale University demonstrates that majoritarian electoral systems, such as Canada's single-member plurality, tend to maintain two strong parties which produce stable governments and both aim to attract the median voter and thus implement policies which benefit the greatest number of people, while party-list and mixed-member proportional representation enables extremist parties and produces unrepresentative coalition governments that privilege these fringes over the median voters. Germany's most recent federal election in 2017 provides the perfect case study, where the right-of-centre *Alternative für Deutschland* and the leftist *Die Linke* (which derives from East German Communists) captured 12.6% and 9.2% of the vote, respectively. The Christian Democrats and Social Democrats then reluctantly re-entered into another Grand Coalition but only after dithering for six months under a caretaker ministry from September 2017 to March 2018. Shapiro *et al.* explain:

> Electoral competition between two large parties that straddle the political middle achieves what no amount of "democratizing" of parties (through primaries) or proliferating of parties could accomplish: it forces parties to take turns at offering, and then implementing, policies that benefit most voters. And because parties, unlike individual politicians, have reputations that go into the indefinite future, competition between parties pushes them to offer policies that will be good for voters in the long term. [...]
>
> Forcing two large parties to compete for the

political middle reduces the hold that smaller, niche parties might have on final coalition building in legislative politics. When only two parties compete for votes, political competition will more likely to converge on economic policies aimed at the broad interests of the nation. By contrast, if parties in a PR system join a government coalition and then logroll the intense preferences of their respective constituencies, the population at large might well pay for the costs of those logrolls in the form of higher prices for protected industries, higher taxes for privileged recipients of redistribution, and possibly lower long term growth.[17]

Proportional representation cannot produce proportional government. Ultimately, governing is about making decisions to the exclusion of other possibilities; it is not about making multiple decisions in proportion to the share of votes that different parties and their platforms won in the previous general election. As John Pepall says, "to govern is to choose."[18] Collective ministerial responsibility makes the authority of the executive binary under Responsible Government: either a party is in government, or it is in opposition. And if a party forms part of a coalition government with representation in cabinet, then it is in power and must bind itself to collective ministerial responsibility. Responsible Government evolved organically over time as the product of practical experience in how Her Majesty's Government can obtain supply; no one designed it as the product of a revolutionary political order to fit perfect Utopian ends. Perhaps this is precisely why it has remained resilient for over 125 years against grandiose and vain reforms.

Notes

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