

## **“DEMOCRACY AND CIVIC ELECTIONS”**

**Thursday, August 6, 2015**

Labour Council has been a consistent advocate for reforming the electoral system in Canada. For many years, we have formally supported moving to proportional representation at the federal and provincial level, and to allow landed immigrants to vote at the municipal/school board level.

Recently, there has been a growing call to change the municipal voting approach to a Ranked Ballot or Ranked Candidate Voting (RCV) system where voters rank the candidates in order of preference. If nobody receives 50% of the total votes, the second preference is added, then the third, fourth etc. until one candidate receives a majority. This system is now being proposed by the Ontario government for all municipal elections, and is supported editorially by the Globe & Mail and Toronto Star. This would be a radical change with very little public support. Before any such system is embraced there needs to be a clear examination of what option would best serve the interest of working people.

It needs to be understood that RCV is **NOT** Proportional Representation. It is only one of many different options for change. It tends to favour candidates in the middle of the political spectrum, while Proportional Representation gives every party a share of seats in relation to the percentage of votes it receives. Labour supports PR because it guarantees that parties which share our basic values would have more representation in Parliament or Queen’s Park, while business interests generally oppose it.

There needs to be serious consideration about the consequences of moving politics to the “middle” of the current political spectrum in Ontario. As a result of three decades of neo-liberalism, what is now reflected as centrism would have been branded as right-wing in the past. The Ontario Liberals are a classic example – with a disturbing history of privatization of hydro, hospitals and transit while pursuing an aggressive austerity agenda for provincial employees and education workers. That approach, along with reducing public revenues through corporate tax cuts, is now deemed to be the norm by society’s power brokers. Any attempt to push back against this new consensus is ridiculed and belittled.

Proponents of RCV suggest it will increase voter turnout, eliminate extremist candidates, return fewer incumbents, and bring greater civility to civic politics. There is nowhere in Canada that RCV has been used, but in the few US cities that have, there is no evidence of significant increase in voter turnout. It is important to remember that most US cities operate on a party system, with pre-election primaries held in a vastly different system than in Canada.

If RCV was exercised at the federal or provincial level, there is little doubt that the NDP would elect fewer seats as the parties supported by business would coalesce around their candidates. In fact, the only time RCV has been used in Canada was in British Columbia after WWII to block the election of a CCF government.

On the question of incumbents, the issue is not how long someone has been elected but in whose interest do they serve? Most of those newly elected to Council in 2014 lean conservative, while most of the new TDSB Trustees were progressive and more racially diverse. That didn’t stop the Wynne government from launching a full-scale attack on the School Board with the aim of reducing what little power trustees have.

The “extreme” in politics that is often referred to is the Rob Ford factor. But it is worth remembering that the stage was set for the Ford election by the year-long effort of the Board of Trade to move politics to the right by its campaign that Toronto had “a spending problem, not a revenue problem”. He was elected with over 47%, and would have easily won under RCV as well. Ironically, the Mayor’s race in 2010 drove voter turnout to an all-time high.

The key questions for labour in Toronto are how to ensure accountability and how to empower working class and racialized communities. This is why Labour Council was one of the few voices opposing the lengthening of municipal terms from three to four years, while at the same time demanding extension of municipal voting rights to landed immigrants. Given the drive by business and its political allies to make austerity and lower wages the new norm, there has to be real concern about changing our electoral system in a way that could marginalize those voices who question that agenda.

The Executive Board recommends that Labour Council:

1. Oppose the imposition of a Ranked Candidate Voting (Ranked Ballot) system for elections at any level of government in Canada without a broad consultation with the public
2. Call for an in-depth report and full public debate on RCV or other options before any change is made to the local electoral system
3. Continue to work for extension of the municipal /school board voting rights to landed immigrants as well as citizens
4. Continue to support the election of Councillors and Trustees at the ward level, with adequate support and constituencies at an appropriate size to both engage and be accountable to residents
5. Continue to support the adoption of Proportional Representation for Federal and Provincial elections.