

Electoral system reform could bring voters back to the polls

By Nathan Howes
SPECIAL TO THE BEAVER

Does your vote count? Canadians may soon need an answer to that question as the possibility of a spring election looms on the horizon.

On Wednesday night, Wayne Smith, executive director for Fair Vote Canada took a crack at giving them one at the Democracy Café.

This was the second event organized by the Oakville chapter of Canadians Advocating Political Participation (CAPP). The latest public forum examined Canada's current electoral system with arguments supporting the adoption of a propor-

tional way of voting.

Under a proportional system, the seats each party wins would be in proportion to the number of votes they have received. Canada's current electoral system is first-past-the-post, or as Smith calls it, "winner-take-all" and is out of date and turns people off politics.

"The reason you're unhappy with politicians is because these are not the people you voted for. The core problem is the voting system and it doesn't have to be this way, but it won't change until we insist that it changes," said Smith.

Canada is divided into 308 electoral districts or ridings. The problem is a candidate can win their

riding with only 40 per cent of the votes, Smith said.

"The other 60 per cent are represented in Parliament by somebody they voted against. It doesn't seem like representative democracy," said Smith. "Across the whole country, we find out that typically one party gets 40 per cent of the votes and that gives them 60 per cent of the seats, which means they get 100 per cent of the power."

He used former Premier Bob Rae and former Prime Minister Jean Chrétien as examples of leaders elected with a disproportional representation of votes.

"(Former Premier) Bob Rae formed a majority government in Ontario with 38 per cent of the votes. In 1997, former Prime Minister Jean Chrétien formed a majority government with 38 per cent of the votes," said Smith. "The one political party has almost unlimited power even though most people voted against them."

"It's not much of a surprise that most of us are not happy with politics, politicians or government policy," he added.

Another example Smith used as a problem with the current system was the last provincial election and the results for the NDP party.

"The NDP increased their votes share, (but) lost seats and lost their provincial party status. Even if you hated the NDP, people were scratching their heads," said Smith.

He also doesn't agree with the balance of power the Bloc Quebecois have in Parliament.

"The Bloc Quebecois gets two-thirds of the seats

in Québec with a third of the vote and they hold the balance of power in our Parliament," he added.

Smith said that proportional voting is not a voting system, but a principle that you should get what you vote for.

"If a political party gets 40 per cent of the votes, they should get 40 per cent of the seats and not 60," said Smith. "The party that gets 10 per cent of the votes should get 10 per cent of the seats, instead of squat, which is what we get under current system."

Smith said since 1920, there have been only a few elections where a party has received 50 per cent of the votes.

"It's much better when no party has a majority and that's normal when you have a proportional system," said Smith. "No party has a majority of the seats because no party gets a majority of the votes."

The last federal election yielded a low voter turnout and Smith said he doesn't expect it to get better with the next election. Only 54 per cent of eligible voters had participated in the 2008 federal election, according to Elections Canada.

"Forty per cent of us don't even bother (voting). The largest group of voters is the group that doesn't vote at all and it's going down (turnout)," said Smith.

He said by changing the electoral system, voter turnout will be higher.

The next Democracy Café is in May, but no date or guest speakers have been announced. For more information on CAPP, visit their website at www.quipdujour.com/capp/. For more information on Fair Vote Canada, visit www.fairvote.ca.



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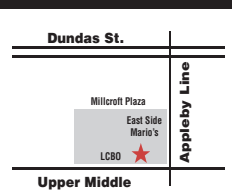
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