**What history can teach us about proportional representation**

By **GREG KOABEL**Opinion **PETER LOVE** Sun., Sept. 9, 2018

Tony Burman’s recent article in the Star (“[Europe’s far right is rebounding](https://www.thestar.com/opinion/star-columnists/2018/08/31/europes-far-right-is-rebounding-so-the-moderates-must-reclaim-the-concept-of-the-nation.html),” Aug. 31) shows how extremist political parties are rapidly becoming a threat to liberal democracy in Europe.

Significantly, proportional representation (PR) is the electoral system used in all the countries that Burman highlights as facing imminent danger from the far right (Austria, Germany, Hungary, Italy, Poland and Sweden). Most people are unaware of how PR has, historically, functioned when facing the kinds of political and economic stress the world is now witnessing.

Former British Columbia premier Ujjal Dosanjh leaves after a No B.C. Proportional Representation Society news conference, in Vancouver, in June. Dosanjh is warning extremist parties could be elected if proportional representation is passed in a referendum this fall.  (DARRYL DYCK / THE CANADIAN PRESS)

The election of Donald Trump, the tariff wars, the dismantling of a united Europe (initiated by Brexit), the migrant crisis, and the appearance of “strong-man” leadership in Russia, Turkey and Hungary, all suggest the Western world is moving into uncharted territory.

The inter-war period, between 1918 and 1939, in Europe has some chilling parallels to what is happening now, and can teach us something about how PR does under such conditions.

The rise of Naziism in Hitler’s Germany was the most significant political disaster of those times, but it was not the only one. Norman Davies’s comprehensive *History of Europe*, lists 15 European democracies that fell to dictatorship during the period. They were, in chronological order, Hungary, Italy, Bulgaria, Spain, Albania, Poland, Portugal, Yugoslavia, Lithuania, Romania, Germany, Austria, Estonia, Latvia and Greece.

Davies points out that the dictators came from all sides of the political spectrum, including fascists, communists, monarchists, anti-monarchists, militarists and even a religious cleric, and concludes that “the only thing they shared was the conviction that Western democracy was not for them.”

In fact, there was something else that those 15 dictators had in common, which Davies fails to mention. They each rose to power in a country that used PR to elect its legislature. No democracy that used first past the post fell to dictatorship during the period.

During the inter-war period, many European democracies fell into a similar pattern of events. Politics exacerbated the divisions within society, coalition governments failed to effectively address the pressing issues of the day, and finally authoritarians stepped in to denounce democracy as a failure. Did proportional representation have a role to play in these outcomes?

Proportional Representation allows for more parties to gain seats in legislatures. (There were 15 parties in the German Reichstag in 1928.) In almost all cases, no party has a majority, and the governing party forms a coalition with other, smaller parties to gain power.

Extremists have less incentive to work within moderate, main-stream political parties, as they can influence politics directly by establishing new parties, with the real possibility of pressuring larger parties into accepting their more extreme policies, and granting privileges, such as cabinet positions, as the price for supporting a coalition. Politicians are motivated to emphasize difference rather than consensus.

This was certainly the case among many PR democracies of inter-war Europe, where parties with irreconcilable differences dominated the political conversation. The plethora of parties caused political instability, producing coalition governments that were contentious and unmanageable, particularly in times of crisis.

Governments often lacked effectiveness, allowing authoritarians to argue that democracy did not deliver what the country needed. A rapid succession of elections and collapsed coalitions set the stage for a “strong-man” promising stability.

During its 14 years of existence (from 1919 to 1933) the Weimar Republic in Germany was governed by 20 different coalitions. After such instability, Hitler’s single party rule appealed to many.

Arguably, large-tent parties favoured in the first-past-the-post system provide political stability. Rather than having a voice in a fringe party, radical thinkers are forced to seek influence within one of the major parties.

In times of crisis the political system tends to encourages consensus, and produces strong governments, rather than fostering division leading to ineffectual leadership.

The possibility of PR being adopted as a provincial electoral system is being considered in the upcoming referendum in B.C. and in this October’s election in Quebec. Before tinkering with our electoral system, Canadians should weigh carefully the risks involved, and remember what happened in Europe.

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