**Andrew Coyne: Which electoral system for B.C.? Any option is better than the status quo**

B.C. has a rare opportunity to fix an electoral system that no longer works. It would be a tragic mistake to let a few complaints about process get in the way

**NATIONAL POST** Updated: October 29, 2018

There is a theory that B.C.’s NDP government would just as soon the province’s referendum on electoral reform failed. I doubt it, but the way the government has chosen to go about it lends the theory some credibility.

Take the double-barreled question on the ballot, for starters. The first asks voters whether the province should use the existing “first past the post” model or “a proportional representation voting system;” the other, to choose among three such systems. Without knowing which of the three would replace FPTP, some voters will be in a dilemma: even if they prefer one or more of the proposed alternatives to FPTP, they might prefer FPTP to the other choices.

The menu of reform options is the second problem, or rather the method by which they were chosen. I’ve warmed to the options themselves, which seem to me good-faith attempts to reconcile the objectives of proportionality and local representation. But their selection by the sitting government, rather than a non-partisan commission or citizens’ assembly, opens the process to accusations of having been engineered to produce a particular outcome.

Third, important details of each of the proposed reforms have been left to be worked out after the referendum. Again, some voters’ ranking of each might depend on how these details were filled in.

The temptation in the face of these uncertainties is to stick with the status quo. Indeed, many critics of reform have seized on them as their primary argument for voting against reform, rather than try to defend FPTP on its merits. This is convenient, since FPTP is indefensible.

I suppose it is possible to imagine a system that was worse, but looking at the three alternatives on offer it is easy to see that, while one may be preferable to the others, any of the three would be superior to the status quo.

None is scary or extreme: the notion that any would result in a raft of fringe or even neo-Nazi parties being elected, as the anti-reform campaign has claimed, is contemptible rubbish — if nothing else, the threshold attached to each, requiring that a party win at least five per cent of the overall vote to win any seats, would see to that. Each uses ballots that are simple enough: if not a single x, as under FPTP, they would require voters to mark perhaps two x’s, or at most 1, 2, 3 …

Most important, all three would deliver a legislature that looked a lot more like what people actually voted for, ridding B.C. of the harmful inequities of first past the post: its tendency to rule by the minority, fewer than 40 per cent of the votes commonly being enough to claim a “majority;” the vast disparities in the weight it assigns to different votes, measured by how many votes it takes to elect a representative of each party, depending on how “efficiently” its vote is distributed; the pressure it puts on voters to vote “strategically,” i.e. for a party other than the one they prefer, for fear of “splitting” or “wasting” their vote; and so on.

What are the three systems? The first, and least-known, is called dual-member proportional (DMP). Voters would elect two members in each ridings. One would be elected directly by the current method. The second would be allocated based on each party’s share of the provincial popular vote: if a party were entitled to, say, 10 seats on this basis, they would be drawn from the 10 ridings where it did best in the popular vote.

The second, in use in Germany and New Zealand, is called mixed-member proportional (MMP). Again, some members, at least 60 per cent, would be elected as they are now, in single-member constituencies. The remainder would be elected from lists of candidates representing the parties in each region of the province, based on the parties’ share of the vote in that region. Here is where the details matter. Many people dislike party lists, fearing these leave the parties to decide which candidates are elected from them. That’s certainly one possibility. But against such “closed” lists, where voters simply indicate their choice of party, are “open” lists, where voters choose the candidates directly. It is unfortunate that this question has not been settled — though even closed lists would not differ all that much from the status quo, where candidates in a riding are often hand-picked by the party leader.

Finally, the system I prefer: rural-urban proportional (RUP). It’s a hybrid of two existing systems. In the cities, where most people live, voters would choose among candidates in multi-member ridings using a ranked ballot: the system known as the single-transferable vote (STV), familiar from B.C.’s two previous referendums and in use today in Ireland, Scotland and Australia. In more sparsely-populated areas, where multi-member ridings would be impractically large, a small number of single-member ridings would be preserved, topped up by an even smaller number of members elected from regional lists a la MMP.

Why do I prefer RUP? Mostly for the STV part. First, it maximizes voter choice: voters can vote directly for the candidates they prefer, whether or not they like a candidate’s party. Second, it represents voters in proportion to their party preferences, not just at the provincial or regional level, but in each riding. Both DMP and MMP try to achieve proportionality by compensating for the distortions of FTTP with members elected by other means; STV builds proportionality from the riding level up.

But again: any of the three would be miles better than the status quo. B.C. has a rare opportunity here to fix an electoral system that no longer works. It would be a tragic mistake to let a few complaints about process get in the way.