**Rob Shaw: Proportional representation debate off to a sad, misleading start**

Beware the MLAs. They are too invested in obtaining and holding power to be trusted to give you the straight facts on proportional representation

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VICTORIA — Pity the ordinary British Columbian trying to understand B.C.’s debate on proportional representation as ballots begin to arrive in the mail.

Either our province is at risk of devolving into a dystopian future of goose-stepping neo-Nazi soldiers on every street corner, or we’re just one vote away from a utopian paradise in which all your social and economic problems are solved by elected officials who co-operate transparently as they hold hands and plot world peace at the legislature.

Those are the extremes being portrayed by groups for and against changing B.C.’s voting system from the current first past the post (FPTP) model to one of three new systems of proportional representation (PR).

Surely, somewhere in-between is a realistic debate on the pros and cons of this referendum. But you didn’t find much evidence of that during the first week of serious campaigning by the official proponent and opponent groups. They’ve each been given $500,000 of taxpayer money to argue their points. And the province is, so far, dumber for it.

The official anti-PR group found itself on the defensive last week for a TV ad that depicts marching soldiers and violent protests, while warning of neo-Nazis and extremism under European governments that have adopted PR. It’s a shameful bit of fearmongering that does more to undermine the credibility of the No side than backstop any potential benefits of FPTP.

Political scientist Max Cameron (a proponent of PR) has said negative advertising undermines the measured debate for voters. But he’s missing the point. The goal by both sides is not a measured debate: It’s simply to win. Using public money.

And negative advertising works. If you doubt that, ask Adrian Dix how his positive 2013 NDP election campaign went, and take a look at how successful the NDP was in 2017 when it executed one of the most negative personal attack campaigns against a political leader in recent memory, assassinating Christy Clark’s credibility by depicting her sitting on a throne of money and scheming to help her rich corporate friends.

The Yes side is just as misleading, in its own way. It has been promoting several videos its ally groups have created in which energetic young hipsters and animated characters pretend to break down the referendum using “facts” and “truth” — while glossing over important unanswered questions about the three PR models, only focusing on the negatives of FPTP and over-exaggerating or distorting things just enough to put the very concept of “truth” into question.

To listen to the Yes side advocates, a B.C. that uses PR will bring its citizens: Happiness, a higher quality of life, fewer deaths from our opioid overdose crisis, an end to partisanship in provincial politics and a truly transparent government that conducts all of its business on the floor of the legislature. There’s about as good a chance of all that happening as there is extremists seizing control of B.C.’s political machinery.

Neither the Yes nor the No side have been able to muster very strong arguments so far, because neither is willing to acknowledge that each system has strengths.

First past the post’s main strengths are that it is simple, easy to understand, and we’ve been using it for decades in relative peace. You have one vote, you cast it for one candidate, and one person wins each riding. Then 87 winners from around the province convene in Victoria to legislate. You don’t need a PhD in mathematics to understand the formula that divides your vote, like under PR.

But many years of using FPTP has shown its weaknesses too. The leader of the party that gets just a few more seats than its nearest opponent can consolidate power inside the premier’s office and run the province like a dictatorship for four-year terms. This diminishes the role of locally-elected MLAs. More than a few incredibly sharp individuals have been elected to Victoria only to be told to shut up and sit there quietly for four years while one premier, a handful of senior cabinet ministers and unelected strategists run things by themselves.

PR’s main strength is its promise of a system that decentralizes the power structure and redistributes it back to MLAs. It accomplishes this not only by electing local MLAs but also topping them up with other MLAs until a party’s seat count matches its provincewide popular vote. It can lead to more minority governments, and, theoretically, more co-operation.

But there are also problems with the three PR options before voters. Two of the three choices (dual member and rural-urban) have never been used before. The third, mixed member proportional, is widely used in other countries, but comes in several forms and B.C. voters won’t know which one they’ll get until after the referendum.

For example, one version of mixed member could see MLAs elected off of candidate lists privately set by the political parties and not voted upon by voters. You can only imagine the kind of political patronage that would then occur among party insiders to get certain people on those lists. Is that the kind of MMP we’ll see in B. C.? Nobody knows. Nor will voters know how their ridings might change, until it’s all over.

Don’t look to our existing crop of MLAs either to help you understand the referendum. B.C. Liberal leader Andrew Wilkinson spent his time in the legislature last week hurling childish insults at Premier John Horgan, calling him a “coward” over delays setting up a PR debate. Horgan had already agreed, and it was the TV networks holding things up.

The Liberals hope the PR debate will increase Wilkinson’s profile if he can defeat Horgan in a live televised forum. But that’s a big if. Everything we’ve seen so far in the past year has indicated Horgan’s more than up to the challenge of keeping his cool and deflecting Wilkinson’s best barbs. There’s a serious possibility the debate might backfire on team Wilkinson.

The NDP and Greens, meanwhile, clearly think a shift to PR will help them stay in power. Horgan has said FPTP is “rigged on behalf of the other side” because the NDP wins fewer elections than centre-right parties like the Liberals. The only way to keep the NDP in power is to change the voting system, according to NDP MLA Rick Glumac, who told the legislature recently: “All the good work that we’re doing right now could be undone if we stick with the first-past-the-post system.”

Beware the MLAs. They are too invested in obtaining and holding power to be trusted to give you the straight facts on PR. Selecting an electoral system just to help one party have a better chance of winning is a horrible way to vote, no matter your political affiliations.

Thankfully, we still have one or two sources of useful information out there. Elections B.C., the non-partisan independent agency administering the referendum, has simple videos and straight facts on its website. Start there.

And if you’re free from 7 p.m. to 9 p.m. on Nov. 15, Simon Fraser University is [moderating what could be an interesting debate](https://www.sfu.ca/publicsquare/upcoming-events/proportional-representation.html) on the referendum at the SFU Goldcorp Centre for the Arts. It won’t have the flash or sizzle of the misleading ads by the advocacy groups, and it won’t have the rhetoric of the MLAs. But that’s probably a good thing.