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Don't fear Trudeau's proportional representation bogeymen

By Andrew Coyne

If I think a party would be bad for Canada, it's my responsibility to get out and persuade my fellow citizens not to vote for them - not rig the...

Perhaps unsatisfied with the response to his earlier attempt to blame the public for breaking his promise on electoral reform, Justin Trudeau has lately tried a new tack. He did it, he now says, to save the country. The problem, it turns out, wasn't that there was "no consensus": the problem, rather, was that there was - in favour of proportional representation. The prime minister who pledged, before the election, to "make very vote count," now warns that to do so would imperil the Canada we hold dear.

"Do you think that Kellie Leitch should have her own party," he asked a questioner, bizarrely, at a town-hall gathering last week in Iqaluit. I had not heard it suggested until now that Ms. Leitch was thinking of forming a party of one, but clearly the peril this represents was uppermost in the prime minister's mind.

Under proportional representation, he told his audience, "a party that represents the fringe voices" (even scarier than the Kellie Leitch Party, one assumes) might win "10, 15, 20 seats in the House" and "end up holding the balance of power." PR, he elaborated the next day, "would augment extremist voices," bringing on an era of "instability and uncertainty" and "putting at risk the very thing that makes us luckier than anyone else on the planet."

It's a safe bet this argument was carefully focus-grouped. The notion that only the electoral system stands in the way of Canadians voting neo-Nazi en masse - or Islamist, or Radical Vegan, pick your bogeyman - is never far from the surface of these discussions. Like other fears of the unknown, it is easy to raise, and hard to refute so long as nobody stops to think about it for half a second.

What, first, is the evidence of this barely suppressed urge to vote for fringe or extremist parties? In the past election, the vote for all fringe parties combined - parties, that is, other than the five currently represented in the House of Commons - added up to 0.79 per cent of the vote. Over the past two decades, it has averaged just over one per cent. The largest fringe party typically receives less than one-third of one per cent of the vote.

Even at the riding level, it is the rare fringe party that manages to obtain so much as one per cent of the vote. In the past election, just 49 candidates from half a dozen parties managed it; in the previous election, only 22. Fewer still get over the two-per-cent mark, and you could count the number of those who reach the fabled three-per-cent threshold on one hand.

Of course, if you change the voting system, you change voter behaviour.

Without the formidable hurdle presented by single-member plurality voting, where only the first-place candidate in each riding gets into Parliament, perhaps it would not feel quite so futile to vote for smaller, even fringe parties. Perhaps more people then would. Fine.

Suppose twice as many did - no, three times. Hell, make it four, no, five times as many: a 400-per-cent increase in the fringe vote. That still wouldn't be enough to elect a single member, let alone the 15 or 20 the prime minister foresees - no, not even under proportional representation.

It's important not to exaggerate how much would change under PR. It's possible to win now, in a riding with several candidates, with as little as 28 per cent of the vote, and quite common to do so with less than 33 per cent. Suppose instead we elected MPs in five-member ridings, as recommended for example by the BC Citizens Assembly in 2005. It would still take a minimum of 16.7 per cent of the vote to win a seat in such a system. (Why not 20 per cent? Do the math: with a sixth of the vote, plus one, it would be impossible for five candidates to finish ahead of you). With smaller electoral districts, it would take even more; with larger ones, less - but even with 10-member districts you'd still need nine per cent of the vote, or about three times as much as the most successful fringe candidate now obtains.

Yes, that would give smaller parties a better chance of electing MPs - smaller, not fringe. See, the thing about of fringe parties is that they're fringe. The reason so few Canadians vote for them now isn't, for the most part, because of our electoral system. It's because few Canadians support them. Of course, the definition is a bit tautological: some of today's mainstream parties were once considered fringe. The Reform party, the Bloc Québécois, and the Greens all started out on the fringe. Is the present system too "risky," for failing to keep them out?

And who are the parties that now populate the margins? The largest, by far, are the free-market Libertarians and the social-conservative Christian



Liam Richards/CP Do you think that Kellie Leitch should have her own party?

Heritage party - maybe not your cup of tea in either case, but neither one remotely threatening to our democracy. The rest - the Communists, the Animal Alliance and so on - are a motley bunch to be sure, but not one of them fits the kind of dark, alt-right fantasy of the prime minister's imagining. Such parties exist in Europe, to be sure: but we are not Europe - a continent with little experience of immigration suddenly coping with the influx of hundreds of thousands of refugees from a war zone.

I wouldn't want to see any of those parties get into Parliament here either. I think the chances of them doing so are pretty slim, under any system. But I also respect the democratic rights of other Canadians. If I think a party would be bad for Canada, it's my responsibility to get out and persuade my fellow citizens not to vote for them - not rig the system so they can't.

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