

Who Represents You?

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WHO REPRESENTS YOU?

Every three or four years, Nova Scotians elect a provincial government. Elected members from the leading party form a cabinet which manages our health care, education, support for disadvantaged members of our communities, care for the environment, worker safety and training, economic development and many other functions. In fulfilling these responsibilities, our provincial government spends about **\$9 billion a year, or \$1 million per hour.**

Politicians do not tend to be held in high esteem at the best of times, and the recent disclosures of inappropriate spending by MLA's have further hurt the image. The new NDP government looks more like its predecessors than was hoped or expected, so the whole political class is under a cloud. Two MLAs have already resigned and been replaced.

The key political roles are premier, opposition leaders, and cabinet members. They represent between a quarter and a half of the elected

members. To fulfill these roles properly requires sound judgment, skill in policy development, and strength in both written and verbal communications. These are in addition to the empathy and endurance that are required to be a successful constituency politician. In fact it is good constituency level skills that get people elected, but these skills are not necessarily those needed by leaders and cabinet members.

It is instructive to examine the backgrounds of our current MLA's. The following table is based on the biographical information provided on the legislature website.

Teaching Professions	28%
Lifetime Politicians	14%
Small Business	10%
Journalists	8%
Health Care Workers	6%
Civil Servants	6%
Lawyers	6%
Other	22%

It is understandable that teachers are as successful as politicians. Their profession provides many of the needed communication skills and they often have deep and broad roots in their communities. Just as important, it is relatively easy for teachers to leave for a run at politics – knowing that the previous job will be there when they or the voters choose. The same is true of many other public sector workers. Members of the teaching professions only represent 4% of the working population, but they represent seven times that many elected members.

Meanwhile larger sectors such as sales and service (24% of workers) or trade and transportation (16%) typically have little or no representation.

There are at present no MLA's with senior private sector leadership experience, no accountants or others with a substantial financial background, no doctors, architects, or engineers, none with substantial experience in information or communications technologies.

It should be no surprise that 60% of the elected members – and two thirds of the governing party – come from the public sector, including health and education. (This may shed light on the reluctance to deal with public sector pension issues.) Yet public sector workers are only 30% of the workforce. Of course this is not the fault of the public sector workers. The problem is that the present system makes it very difficult for most private sector workers to participate.

Consider the challenges to a talented private sector worker seeking to be elected. First she must secure a nomination by her party, and then become elected in a province where many ridings are three-way races. Both campaigns demand considerable time for no remuneration. If the candidate is unsuccessful she may well have hurt

her employment opportunities with her private sector employer.

The private sector has a vested interest in being better represented. Groups such as the Chamber of Commerce could lead a discussion about human resource policies that would encourage participation in political life, including leaves of absence for campaigning for and, if elected, serving in public office. Likewise, political parties have an interest in managing their nomination processes to facilitate private sector participation.

But more is needed. For this and other reasons, Nova Scotia should embark on a ten-year experiment with partial proportional representation.

It would work roughly as follows:

After each general election, an additional ten seats would be distributed among the parties based on their share of the total provincial vote. Typically this would provide four or five seats to the governing party with the rest divided among the opposition. The party leaders would choose the people to fill the seats.

The proportional representation (PR) members would have no constituency responsibilities and would need no constituency offices. The base pay should be less than that for constituency members.

A number of PR formats have been proposed in other provinces but rejected by voters in referendum polls. In significant measure, this was because the concepts being proposed were very difficult for voters to understand and because the bar for acceptance was set too high (in BC, for example, 60% of voters and a majority of voters in 60% of ridings was needed for approval).

But even a relatively simple proposal such as described here can only be understood by voters

having experience with it. So it is argued that the voters should get ten years experience with the model and then have an opportunity to vote on a permanent proposal.

There are advantages of this proposal:

1. This will provide an opportunity for the legislature to improve minority representation where needed:

a) In the present legislature, there are two undersized constituencies, Argyle and Preston. In the last provincial election, the number of votes cast in each was just over half the average number cast in other constituencies. The two were established for the worthwhile goal of ensuring representation from Acadian and African Nova Scotian communities. But in practice, the Acadian community is well represented outside of Argyle, while the African Nova Scotian member is not from Preston.

b) The strategy used in Argyle and Preston does not work for Aboriginal communities. The existing legislation acknowledges the shortcoming and proposes that some form for achieving Mi'kmaq representation be found as part of the next revision.

c) Women continue to be under-represented in the Legislative Assembly. Women now form clear majorities of university students and outnumber men in faculties such as law and medicine. So it is not a question of talent. Some would argue that women are less likely than men to choose a political career because they are smart — knowing the risks and demands of the process. (An excellent read on this topic can be found in “The Sexual Paradox” by Susan Pinker.)

The proposed format would allow each of these to be addressed. To be realistic, with only ten positions to fill the system cannot solve all issues. But it does provide a very valuable tool to push for more representative government.

2. This would provide a vehicle for parties to attract high quality candidates who may be able to take a fixed term secondment from their present jobs (for cabinet members) or to serve while continuing in their current careers (for others).

3. When parties change leaders, they often select as a new leader someone from outside of caucus. This would enable the new leader to enter the legislature immediately without having to wait for a by-election (which also requires a sitting member to resign) or general election.

4. When forming a cabinet, the Premier will be able to access a broader range of talent. This will of course be a disappointment to some constituency members who have prevailed in the demanding process of being elected as individuals. But it should result in stronger cabinets, which is more important.

5. The choices made by party leaders to fill these positions will tell voters a lot about their leadership skills.

6. Every vote counts. In many constituencies, there is a highly probable winner which can discourage supporters of other parties from voting.

With this system, voters will know that their vote also contributes to the province-wide distribution – which may improve turnout.

The House of Assembly Act calls for an independent elections boundary commission to be appointed before the end of 2012. This commission's recommendations can be implemented before the next general election.

The commission's proposals should include implementation of a partial proportional representation system as described here.

Voters do not feel well served by the existing system. It is time to try some new ideas.



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