

OUR UNREPRESENTATIVE PARLIAMENT

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A COUPLE of mimeographed sheets recently issued by the Chief Electoral Officer for Canada cast a disturbing light on our method of electing members of the House of Commons. That, of course, was not the Chief Electoral Officer's intent. His returns make no comment. They merely tabulate the votes cast for each political party in the general elections of 1949 and, for comparison, in the general elections of 1945. But while never straying from the matter-of-fact level of cold statistics, they do in fact, constitute a severe indictment of our whole voting system.

Disparity between the popular vote (i.e. the total of votes cast for a party) and the number of members that party has been able to elect to the House of Commons has long been a theme of the popular press. The suffering party in opposition has time and again declared its intention to introduce some form or other of proportional representation—if only it is returned to power. But once it is in power, and a beneficiary of the so-called "luck of the ballot", reform is forgotten and nothing is done.

But let us examine the figures of the Chief Electoral Officer. They are worth the trouble, for never since Confederation, so far as I have been able to trace, has the gap between the popular vote and the number of candidates returned been so great as it is in the recent general elections. When the party totals are examined, the great Liberal landslide diminishes to much humbler proportions. The Progressive Conservatives actually increased their total vote although their membership in the House of Commons dropped disastrously. Nor do the returns indicate any great swing in vote from the two Opposition parties to the Government.

The total vote cast in the general election of 1949 was 5,856,307 against 5,246,130 cast in the general elections of 1945. Of the 600,000 increase, rather more than 100,000 were cast in the new province of Newfoundland.

As a result of the general elections, Liberal membership of the House of Commons (including Independent Liberals) rose from 125 to 193; Progressive Conservative fell from 67 to 41; C.C.F. membership dropped from 28 to 12.

Expressed as percentages (the calculations are my own) the

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Liberal party, in the general elections of 1945, secured 41.3 per cent of the total vote, but with that 41.3 per cent elected 51 per cent of the members of the House.

In the general election of 1949, the Liberal party polled 49.96 per cent of the total vote, but with that 49.96 percent of the total vote elected 73 per cent of the members to the House.

In 1945, the Progressive Conservatives secured 28.4 per cent of the total vote, but with that 28.4 per cent elected only 25 per cent of the members of the House. In 1949, the Progressive Conservatives polled 29.7 per cent of the total vote, but elected only 15 per cent of the members.

In 1945 the C.C.F. polled 15.66 per cent of the total vote and elected 11.42 of the members.

In 1949, the C.C.F. secured 13.66 of the total vote, but elected only 4.58 per cent of the membership.

In each of the two general elections, it will be noted, the "luck of the ballot" went to the party in power. In 1949, the Liberal party, with rather less than one-half of the total votes cast, secured the greatest overall majority in the House of Commons ever recorded.

The Progressive Conservatives, although their popular vote and their percentage of the total vote both increased, had their representation in the House of Commons cut from 67 to 41.

Take now the popular vote for each of the major parties, province by province:

THE LIBERALS

	1945	1949
Ontario.....	745,571	930,388
Quebec.....	722,707	981,047
Nova Scotia.....	141,911	177,534
New Brunswick.....	100,939	123,576
Prince Edward Island.....	30,696	33,480
Manitoba.....	111,863	153,924
British Columbia.....	125,085	169,115
Saskatchewan.....	124,191	161,811
Alberta.....	67,662	116,614
Yukon.....		3,284
Newfoundland.....		75,256

THE PROGRESSIVE-CONSERVATIVES

	1945	1949
Ontario.....	757,057	757,989
Quebec.....	138,344	397,765
Nova Scotia.....	114,214	126,375
New Brunswick.....	77,225	88,038
Prince Edward Island.....	30,025	32,989
Manitoba.....	80,303	70,709

British Columbia.....	128,529	128,686
Saskatchewan.....	70,830	53,581
Alberta.....	58,077	56,949
Yukon.....	849
Newfoundland.....	29,154

THE C.C.F.

	1945	1949
Ontario.....	260,502	315,617
Quebec.....	33,729	17,789
Nova Scotia.....	51,892	33,263
New Brunswick.....	14,999	9,450
Prince Edward Island.....	2,685	1,626
Manitoba.....	101,892	83,256
British Columbia.....	132,068	145,226
Saskatchewan.....	167,233	152,380
Alberta.....	57,077	30,377
Yukon.....	584	1,140
Newfoundland.....	197

The straight Social Credit vote dropped from 214,998 in 1945 to 139,801 in 1949. But if the vote for the Union des Electeurs is added, the 1949 figure is raised to 224,781. Yet Social Credit held 13 seats in the last Parliament. In the present Parliament, they hold only ten.

If the House of Commons, however, does not accurately reflect public opinion, what of the Senate? In those dim, remote days when he first became Leader of the Opposition, Mr. MacKenzie King was ardent for Senate reform. Memory dims after so many years, but, as I remember it, Mr. MacKenzie King would have limited the powers of the Senate even as the British Parliament Act limits the power of the House of Lords. Mr. Mackenzie King became Prime Minister. The long liberal reign began. But there was no Senate reform. The Senate, if it wishes, can still kill any Bill no matter what majority that Bill may have received in the House of Commons. It claims the right to amend money Bills downwards but not upwards. In other words, it can decrease, but not increase, the amount provided in a money Bill. The House of Commons had never admitted that the Senate has such a right. But the Senate has amended money Bills in the past, and, although under protest, the House of Commons has accepted Senate amendments to money Bills. The House of Lords has no such power, nor had it such power before the Labour Government applied its recent additional curb.

And the long reign of Liberal power has glutted the Senate

with Liberal nominees. As Parliament met for its present session, the party standing in the Senate was:

Liberals.....	79
Conservatives.....	15
Vacant.....	8
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Total.....	102

When the eight vacancies are filled with either Liberals or Liberal sympathizers, the Senate will be well on its way to emulate Hitler's Reichstag in unanimity.

The gap between the popular vote for a party and the number of representatives that party has in the House of Commons is not confined to Canada. It is found at Westminster in scarcely less degree. In the 1935 general elections in the United Kingdom, Conservative and National candidates together secured 55 per cent of the total vote but returned 69 per cent of the members of the House of Commons. The Labour party polled 39 per cent of the vote but returned only 26 per cent of the members. In the 1945 general elections, the roles were reversed. With 50 per cent of the vote, the Labour party returned 64 per cent of the members. With 41 per cent of the vote, the Conservatives and National party returned only 34 per cent of the members.

The cause is two-fold:

1. We still retain an archaic voting system, devised at a time when the two-party contest for one seat was the rule.
2. We still return a candidate to Parliament on a simple plurality over his nearest opponent although the majority of electors may have voted against him. It follows that a Government may be returned to power (as was the case in the last Parliament of Canada) although most of its supporters in the House of Commons were elected on a minority vote.

This unbalanced system of party representation strikes at the basis of our parliamentary government. It is axiomatic that the government of the day should be faced with an alert and effective Opposition. Opposition effectiveness, however, is severely limited under the circumstances such as the present. The Opposition may criticize. It may go through the usual routine of moving amendments. But it cannot challenge the House to a division without revealing its own numerical weakness. Revolt among Liberal back-benchers? That is always possible.

Revolts among Governments back-benchers are easily crushed, however by a quiet threat of dissolution.

More and more, the executive tends to control Parliament. Both speakers are nominees of the Government. Chairmen of parliamentary committees are Government nominees. By its control of the order of business, a government can, if it wishes, block the most fervent of back-benchers. Theoretically, the Government is responsible to the House of Commons. If it is defeated in the House of Commons on a major issue, it must either resign or dissolve Parliament. It is significant, however, that only once has a federal government in Canada been defeated in the House of Commons. And that was by a vote cast in error.

Reforms in party representation in both Houses of Parliament are urgently needed. Otherwise, Parliament will become little better than a sounding board for the party that happens to be in power.