

Promise, Fail, Repeat: Reforming the Two-Party Monopoly that has Failed New Brunswick

Tony Tremblay

It is a truism, many times proven, that politicians will never vote themselves under control. Voters should have known that when a campaigning Justin Trudeau, now prime minister of Canada, vowed that the 2015 federal election would be the last one decided by the first-past-the-post (FPTP) voting system. It was a campaign promise of a scope rarely seen in Canadian politics, but Trudeau backed away from the idea as soon as he formed a majority government. When that outcome made it clear that his newly risen Liberal Party of Canada would have to share power with rivals, Trudeau fled from electoral reform with rare decisiveness, though not before appointing a committee of MPs to undertake a costly nation-wide public consultation on the issue. An outsider to politics would have been aghast at the casual glibness shown to voters and to taxpayer dollars. Is it any wonder that voters are so jaded?

The situation in New Brunswick is not much different: political stakes are high; politicians will say (and spend) just about anything to get and hold power; and promises that become inconvenient are quickly jettisoned. But New Brunswick also presents a key difference from its federal counterpart in regard to the electoral landscape: because the provincial population is so small—about 60% that of the city of Calgary—residents have unusually high degrees of engagement. Not all of those residents cast a ballot, but most have strong opinions about the state of the province and the political actors running the show. And those residents, in every forum available, are expressing unprecedented dissatisfaction with the narrow range of options at election time.

The chorus is pointed and shrill: yo-yoing back and forth between one-term Liberal or Conservative governments has become untenable, a situation that not only weakens democracy by narrowing choice and stifling new ideas but also contributes to the province's increasingly dismal performances in national indices. Our taxation and debt loads are unsustainable, and our provincially funded health and education systems are consistently among the worst in the country. The governance model that our current electoral system allows seems unable to advance New Brunswick's interests.

Surely it is obvious to all but the self-interested defenders of the two-party status quo that something is amiss in New Brunswick. Would it not be in everyone's interest to explore all possible solutions to the problems that face us, including electoral reform?

Taking its cues from earlier provincial governments in Canada and New Brunswick, as well as an alarmingly aggrieved electorate, the Gallant government of New Brunswick thought so, taking steps to formalize a process to explore reform. In 2017, the New Brunswick Commission on Electoral Reform released its final report. Entitled "A Pathway to an Inclusive Democracy," the report opens the door to discussions that we hope will resonate during the 2018 provincial election campaign. It is in the interest of all New Brunswickers that voters press candidates to take action on electoral reform. We are living in a province where one-term governments are becoming the norm and where the divide between the electorate and the political class is rapidly widening, to the benefit of neither. We need change in our electoral system, and New Brunswick needs new ideas. The time for electoral reform has come.

Why Should New Brunswick Voters Be Interested in Electoral Reform?

Because the two-party system in the province is failing us. Not only is New Brunswick at or near the bottom of most national indices—economic growth, debt, health, education, child poverty, immigration, outmigration, literacy, family income—but an already-cynical population is increasingly doubtful that New Brunswick's course can be altered, an attitude that does not bode well for the hard work that lies ahead. A disenfranchised and jaded populace is incapable of contributing to the extent that is needed. Something has to change that invites the New Brunswick voter *back into* the system of governance. Backroom deals, party favours, secret concessions, information moratoria, and other partisan shenanigans that are characteristic of old, two-party politics have not advanced our provincial cause, serving only to cultivate a level of voter distrust that reckless pre-election extravagances seek desperately to allay. Electoral reform, whatever shape it may take, offers New Brunswick voters a way back into a system that has abandoned them for the political and business classes.

Why Should New Brunswick's Political Class Be Interested in Electoral Reform?

Because the two-party system in the province is as harmful to those who wish to enter public service as it is to those who are being served. If public servants aspire to the ideal, whether the improvement of lives or the health of the commons, then those political officials must be the first (being the closest) to abandon systems of governance that are clearly not working. And the fact that that statement will strike some readers as naïve is clear evidence of where the problems lie. Either the political class has lost its way or power is so seductive that economic collapse and social ruin are acceptable risks. (Strong language, perhaps, but not in the wake of the Dominion Bond Rating Service's recent downgrade of the New Brunswick economy from "stable" to "negative.") I choose to believe the former, hoping that the two-party elites in this province will come to understand that sharing a modicum of power in the interest of greater public engagement will serve everyone's interests by accommodating new voices and visions in a province desperately needing both. Besides, since when does bipartisan decision-making not serve the higher good? The smoldering empire to the south provides the obvious answer to that question.

Let it not be said any longer that the two-party status quo is working for New Brunswick. Nor let it be said, as it was in the past to stop reform, that the old, two-party system is better because it allows sitting governments to reach consensus, to plan full-term mandates, and to enact partisan legislation that is clearly "red" or "blue." Since FPTP (complete with consensus by whip, top-down mandates, and muscular partisanship) has *not* managed to make New Brunswick more robust economically, socially, or democratically, we should at least be open to trying alternatives. If we refuse, then we have missed an opportunity to serve the province as political and intellectual workers. If we refuse, we are in it for power, not improvement.

The seven essays in this special issue of the *Journal of New Brunswick Studies/Revue d'études sur le Nouveau-Brunswick* examine the history and explore the implications of electoral reform in New Brunswick. All but one of the essayists participated in the provincial commission on electoral reform. The essayist who did not, Finlay Macdonald, is a long-time New Zealand journalist who has watched electoral reform change the political landscape of his country. These essays are required reading for

New Brunswick voters and political candidates who are seeking ways to bring the province out of its long period of voter distemper and economic malaise.

I end with novelist Robert Pirsig's advice to those who are contemplating change. If change is to be permanent, he advises, so must it be structural, for only structural change alters effects. Anything less is cosmetic, a mere trifling that only extends the status quo. If we want New Brunswick to be something other than the poor performer that it is today—and if we want to address the recurring cycles of want that have hampered our progress for a century—then nothing less than bold change is required. Pirsig's advice is worth taking seriously:

To tear down a factory or to revolt against a government or to avoid repair of a motorcycle because it is a system is to attack effects rather than causes; and as long as the attack is upon effects only, no change is possible. The true system, the real system, is our present construction of systematic thought itself, rationality itself, and if a factory is torn down but the rationality which produced it is left standing, then that rationality will simply produce another factory. If a revolution destroys a systematic government, but the systematic powers of thought that produced that government are left intact, then those patterns will repeat themselves in the succeeding government. There's so much talk about the system. And so little understanding. (88)

And so has it been in New Brunswick for generations: new promises, same system, same results. More debt, longer wait times, lower test scores. It is time for significant change.

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Work Cited

Pirsig, Robert. *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*. 1974. Toronto: Bantam, 1982.