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## It's time for effective representation for national minorities

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### Abstract (summary)

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This week, Liberal MP Stephane Dion argued in a Gazette opinion piece ("A 'P3' voting system would be a perfect fit for Canada," April 24) that what Canada needs is a "P3" voting system - short form for a "proportional-preferential-personalized" vote.

We have another vision for effective representation. Aboriginals and francophones outside Quebec have long been shut out of parliamentary representation. We argue that it is time to address this problem.

Largely ignored by most Canadian newspapers, three boundary commissions in each province have - since February - been charged with creating new federal ridings based on the 2011 census. Some have already stopped accepting public input for the initial drafting of their maps, while others will stop by May 1. Public hearings will be held later this year, but only to comment on plans that have already been made.

Despite the outreach efforts of the commissions, media neglect of this process shoves democratic decision-making behind closed doors and frustrates serious conversation about the nature of political representation in Canada.

The Fair Representation Act, passed in December 2011, will add a total of 30 new seats to the House of Commons: 15 seats will go to Ontario, six each to Alberta and British Columbia, and three to Quebec. Quebec's total of 78 seats will be its lowest share since Confederation, and its lowest share relative to population since the mid-1970s. This reduction led to an outcry by Quebec politicians, since it will potentially disrupt the delicate political balance between anglophones and francophones in Canada.

Francophones outside Quebec have never had representation in proportion to their numbers. Like aboriginals, they tend to be spread out across large geographic areas and often dispersed among anglophones. This makes it difficult to create ridings with majorities of either group. In the 2001 census, for example, the nearly 500,000 francophones in Ontario constituted 4.3 per cent of the population but held a majority in only one of the province's current 106 seats.

How can we correct such underrepresentation?

Option 1: Provinces could establish separate voter rolls and seats by national minority groups, as called for by a 1991 royal commission. This option was rejected in Canada, but New Zealand has long used the Maori Electoral Option, allowing its citizens of Maori descent to join either a general or a Maori roll. Within Canada, school boards in Quebec are now elected from separate French and English lists. Following this method, a province could reserve a number of seats for francophone or aboriginal constituencies. In Ontario, for example, up to five of 121 seats (reflecting 4 per cent of the population) could be set aside for electors on francophone lists. But the differentiation of electors by language and other ethnic markers rightfully makes many uneasy, and would raise difficult legal questions.

Option 2: Creating francophone-or aboriginal-majority ridings with relatively small populations may be a more palatable alternative.

Canadian ridings already have significant population disparities, both within and among provinces. In the 2003 representation order, Labrador formed its own riding with fewer than 28,000 residents. In contrast, West Vancouver-Sunshine Coast in British Columbia - the largest riding in Canada - had nearly 4.5 times that number of residents.

If Canada tolerates "small ridings" to protect the interests of smaller provinces, rural areas and northern residents, it should tolerate them for national minorities. Creating single ridings from communities in different parts of a province would allow boundary commissioners to form francophone or aboriginal majorities without resorting to extremely small ridings.

Aboriginals may stand to gain the most from such strategies. In the 2003 representation, aboriginals held majorities in only four ridings (just over one per cent of the total number of ridings in the country) yet constituted more than four per cent of Canada's population. This is not reassuring for a segment of the population that too often faces the harshest of social problems.

Manitoba and Saskatchewan - each with aboriginal populations of about 15 per cent - already use a de facto "small-riding" strategy. Each has an aboriginal-majority district, with total population ranging between 65,000 and 75,000. Yet Alberta, British Columbia, Ontario and Quebec all have more than 100,000 aboriginal residents without a single majority riding among them.

The time has come for boundary commissioners to examine these and other alternatives.

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