**Andrew Coyne: Electoral reform is finally coming to Canada and not a moment too soon**

Monday may in time come to be seen as the day electoral reform came to Canada. A year from now the country that, alone among those still using “first past the post” system of casting and counting votes, does so at every level of government, could have very different systems in place in several jurisdictions, municipal and provincial.

Starting Monday, and continuing until Nov. 30, British Columbians will be asked to vote by mail in a double-barreled referendum on electoral reform. The first question asks whether they wish to replace first past the post with a system of proportional system; the second, which of three “pro rep” systems they prefer.

Unlike the province’s two previous referendums on the subject, the threshold for reform is just 50 per cent: there will be no repeat of the 2005 debacle, when reform was supported by 58 per cent of the voters, including a majority in all but two of the province’s 79 ridings, and yet still somehow failed to pass the convoluted double-super-majority bar the province’s Liberal government had devised.

But B.C. is only part of the story. Monday is also the day voters go to the polls in 444 municipal elections across Ontario, the first since provincial legislation allowing municipalities to change from first past the post, where voters mark an x beside the candidate of their choice, to ranked ballots, familiar from party leadership races, where voters mark their ballots 1, 2, 3…

Of course the differences do not end there: where under first past the post the winner is the candidate with the most votes, no matter how few, under ranked ballots the second (and lower) choices of the last-place candidates after each round of counting are added to the tallies of the remaining contenders until one candidate has more than 50 per cent.

In two of the cities voting on Monday, Kingston and Cambridge, elections will be accompanied by referendums on ranked ballots. In a third, London, elections for mayor and city council will themselves use ranked ballots, council having taken it upon itself to decide the matter in May of 2017.

This is not proportional representation, note: the objective of most electoral reformers. Though a majority, rather than plurality, will decide the winners, voters will still elect a single councillor from each district, “winner-take-all” — 50 per cent plus of the vote good for 100 per cent of the representation — rather than the multi-member districts that make proportionate representation possible.

It is, however, something other than first past the post. This is what makes London’s vote, in particular, such a landmark. Opponents of electoral reform have until now had unchallenged possession of the status quo in Canada: any other system could be presented as some ghastly foreign invention, unsuited to Canadian circumstances. Lacking personal familiarity with the alternatives, voters have too easily been misled with wild caricatures bearing no resemblance to how these systems actually work.

As of Monday, however, we will have a working model of reform on Canadian soil. As with anything being done for the first time, it may well arrive accompanied by the odd hitch. Possibly because the decision was taken by council, rather than by referendum, popular awareness of the new system is reportedly low. Some voters will think they are obliged to rank every candidate on the ballot, or their vote will not count (in fact they can rank a maximum of three choices, fewer if they like); others, that they can vote for the same candidate three times, and so on.

But it’s at least as significant what else will happen on election day — indeed, what already has. The mayoral campaign, in particular, has been notably lacking in the usual name-calling and recriminations, even in the campaign’s last days: why risk alienating other candidates’ supporters, who might otherwise mark you second or third, especially in a close race?

And it is close: a recent poll has three of the 14 candidates for mayor in a virtual tie for the lead in voters’ first-choices, each in the mid-20s, with a fourth a few points behind. In elections as we have known them until now, there would be enormous pressure on one or more of the candidates to drop out, rather than “split the vote”; voters, likewise, would be told not to “waste” their ballot, but to vote “strategically,” that is to defeat the candidate they most dislike rather than to support the candidate they most prefer.

On election night, moreover, a winner might be declared, under first past the post, with as little as 25 per cent or so of the vote. In the current race that might even be the candidate of the left, though the other three leading contenders are all to the right. This time, however, thanks to the ranked ballot, the winner is likely to be the candidate of the right who can draw the most second-and third-choices from supporters of the other candidates — including the candidate of the left. And, of course, whoever wins, will have to get at least the majority of the vote.

And after Monday? Coincident with the next provincial election — it’s scheduled for next October, give or take six months — Prince Edward Islanders, though they voted for reform in 2016, will take part in a do-over vote, turnout in the previous referendum having been deemed too low.

Most significant of all: the Coalition Avenir Quebec, newly installed as the province’s government, has promised legislation implementing proportional representation by this time next year, on a model already agreed to with two of the other three parties.

Nothing’s set in stone. Voters may get cold feet. Politicians might renege. London’s experiment may prove a disaster. But if you had to bet, you’d say somewhere, somehow, electoral reform is coming to Canada, and not a minute too soon.