

# Michael Chong appears to be a nice guy, but my, the company he keeps!

*More to the Story*

By Ben Bennett

I am really mad at Michael Chong.

I went to the recent forum on the proposed Reform Act and proportional representation fully prepared to wear my cynic's hat. It's headwear that is easily donned given the record and actions of his Conservative colleagues in Ottawa. And yet.

We had heard from friends in the county that the MP for Wellington-Halton Hills was different; a nice guy, fair, and, dare we say it, progressive? And yet, he spends his time with some people I can barely listen to without sneering, spitting, heckling the television set or in some cases, putting my foot through it.

For those of you who are not political junkies, here is some background. Michael Chong was elected 10 years ago. His riding, mostly rural, surrounds Guelph. He is immensely popular, garnering more than 60% of the vote last time out. He is known as one of the few MPs at Ottawa who have openly opposed party policy and survived. A few years ago resigned his junior cabinet post – and the goodies that came with it – when the Tories officially recognized the Quebecois as a nation within Canada.

For some time he has been concerned about how to reform Parliament, make MPs more relevant, and reduce the power of the Prime Minister's Office. This culminated in his private member's bill, the proposed Reform Act. It seeks, amongst other things, to remove the necessity of a party leader to "sign off" on local candidates and to have party leaders elected by sitting MPs rather than party members.

At the April 6 forum at St. Paul's Church in Guelph no one asked the question many of us were all wondering about (what the heck is a nice guy like him doing in the company of those snarky bullies who ignore what anyone else thinks?). In response to another question, however, he noted that he agrees with 90% of the Tory policies. And if this effort at reform fails he will hang in and try again. (I think he's banking on the post-Harper environment tilting back to "progressive" Tory policies.)

When asked about his views on proportional representation Mr. Chong suggested waiting five years or so, assuming his bill passes, and seeing how people feel about things then.

Given that the current first past-the-post system favours the ruling parties, or potential ruling parties, it has been very hard to get anyone in power to do anything to change our voting system. It is not in their interests to jeopardize their electability by making the system more fair.

The NDP and Greens have championed the PR cause over the years, but haven't had much clout to make anything happen. When the Liberals needed the NDP to stay in power in the mid 2000s, Jack Layton was able to use his influence to get what became known as "the NDP budget". As far as we know, however, there was no move to add a requirement to study PR in any agreements to keep the Liberal Government afloat.

When the notion for a different voting system developed by a constituent assembly was finally put on the ballot in British Columbia a few years back, some smart alec decided it needed a 60% vote to change things. It got 58%. And yet, everyone seems to be agreed that a Quebec referendum would be conclusive if "50 + 1" supported the measure. How "fair" was that?

A couple of years later when we got the issue on the ballot in Ontario, again following a long process involving citizens, the system was poorly explained, poorly promoted and the vote in favour was barely one third.

If we end up with another minority after this spring's expected provincial election, the those holding the balance of power— likely the NDP — will again have the chance to get PR include as part of a working agreement. We'll see if that happens.

Given the governing cycle of Liberals/Tories over the years, we cannot expect either of them to really consider PR — although the Liberals are at least claiming to look at it. And unfortunately, when even the progressive parties smell power, they seem to forget about the lack of fairness of the system, too.

(Ben Bennett's past columns can be found at [www.bbc.guelph.org](http://www.bbc.guelph.org).)