



A PRELIMINARY STATEMENT TO THE PEOPLE OF BRITISH COLUMBIA

The Citizens' Assembly on Electoral Reform has completed the first phase of its work and eagerly looks forward to hearing the views of all British Columbians. We have organized public hearings to be held in communities all over the province during May and June. In this report we indicate what we have accomplished to date and provide a preliminary assessment of the strengths and weaknesses of our current electoral system. We invite comments on this as well as on the features of electoral systems which we feel merit further discussion and debate.

At this stage, the Assembly has not come to any conclusion about whether the present system needs to be reformed. In fact we have deliberately refrained from doing so. We are still busy learning about democratic electoral systems and want to hear from our fellow citizens about what they think. This is a time for discussion and debate and we invite all British Columbians to join us in this process.

1. The BC Citizens' Assembly on Electoral Reform

The British Columbia Citizens' Assembly on Electoral Reform was established by the government and legislature in the spring of 2003 with a clear mandate. It is to “*assess models for electing Members of the Legislative Assembly*” and specifically the “*manner by which voters' ballots are translated into seats in the Legislative Assembly.*” If the Assembly concludes that an alternate model to the one now used ought to be adopted, then its recommendation is to be put to a referendum of the province's voters on May 17, 2005, the time of the next scheduled provincial election. In making any recommendation, the Assembly is to ensure that any change would “*be consistent with both the Constitution of Canada and the Westminster parliamentary system.*”

The Citizens' Assembly was established by an order-in-council which provided that its membership was open to all British Columbians on the provincial voters list with the exception of working politicians. Jack Blaney was designated, by a unanimous vote of the Legislative Assembly, to chair the Assembly and direct the work of its staff. A two-stage random selection process – carefully balanced by gender and age and structured to include individuals from all electoral districts in the province – led to a further 160 citizens being randomly chosen from the provincial voters' list to constitute the Assembly's membership.

The Assembly constitutes a representative group of non-elected British Columbia citizens. Its members range in age from 19 to 78. They come from a diverse set of backgrounds, ethnic communities and occupations, but all are concerned with the health of the province's democracy and its common political life. The members have committed to working together over most of

2004 in a serious and sustained effort to evaluate the electoral system and determine if there is another system that might serve the province better.

The Assembly's work is divided into three phases. The first, now completed, involved detailed study of the range of electoral systems used in modern democracies. Given that no two countries use exactly the same system, this proved to be a major undertaking but it has given the Assembly an appreciation of the fact that there is no such thing as a perfect system. All electoral systems involve trade-offs among desirable elements, and any system must reflect the values and aspirations of the community that will use it. In a subsequent section of this statement, we report on our understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of the system now used in British Columbia.

The second phase of the Assembly's work will involve listening carefully to the views of all British Columbians. What kind of politics would they like to see? What sorts of electoral systems do they believe are appropriate or desirable? Assembly members will participate in public hearings around the province and study formal submissions made to them (available on our website: www.citizensassembly.bc.ca).

In the third phase, scheduled for the fall of 2004, the Assembly will meet to hear formal presentations on the merits of alternate systems and then to discuss and debate the issues around their mandate so they can then draft a set of final recommendations for their fellow British Columbians. The mandate requires that they either endorse the current system or propose a specific alternative.

This statement signals the end of the first phase and invites British Columbians to consider and respond to the preliminary assessment that Assembly members have made of the electoral system now in use and their suggestions for further consideration.

2. The Assembly's Work to Date

The first learning phase of the Assembly stretched over six busy weekends from January through March. Assembly members came together and worked hard to learn about the way our political system works, and then to study five different families of electoral systems. With presentations from staff members and visiting experts from across Canada and around the world, the Assembly learned how variations in constituency size, ballot paper formats and counting formula combine to produce a wide variety of different systems.

The families studied include:

- Majority systems (as in France or Australia)
- Plurality systems (as in Canada or India)
- Proportional Representation by list systems (as in Finland or the Netherlands)
- Proportional Representation by transferable vote systems (as in Ireland or Australia)
- Mixed systems (as in Germany or Japan)

The Assembly has taken the measure of these different kinds of systems and discovered that each has their advantages and disadvantages. (For details, please consult our website or contact the Assembly or its members for 'fact sheets' outlining these systems.) In accordance with their mandate, the Assembly has paid particular attention to the effects of these different electoral

models “*on the government, the Legislative Assembly and the political parties.*” This intensive study has involved the mastery of complex concepts and the appreciation of relevant comparative experience through absorbing formal presentations, engaging in small group discussions, and undertaking considerable private study of advanced political science literature. All Assembly members have been active participants – attendance at Assembly meetings has been virtually 100% – and all members have participated fully and equally in the discussions that have led to this preliminary statement.

Assessing the comparative merits of differing systems is neither easy nor straightforward but Assembly members identified several criteria to use as benchmarks:

- The extent to which electoral outcomes reflected votes cast (the issue of vote-seat relationships)
- The nature of the linkage between voters and their representatives (the character of local representation)
- The range and nature of choice offered to voters (issues ranging from the number and nature of competing parties to the form of the ballots)
- The impact of the system on governance (the issues of effective government and the working of the legislature).

The Assembly quickly realized that there is no perfect system. The problem for it has been one of weighing the relative merits of the different systems and the trade-offs in desirable features that they require. At this stage in the work of the Assembly, members have reached a general consensus on the basic strengths and weaknesses of the present electoral system and believe that, before any decisions are taken, further reflection and debate is needed.

3 The Citizens’ Assembly Assessment of the Current BC Electoral System

Assembly members are cognizant that our current single-member plurality electoral system – sometimes known as First-Past-the-Post – has much to recommend it. The system has been in widespread use in British Columbia and most other parts of Canada for most of our history and has served us well. We have a flourishing democracy in which voters hold politicians and governments accountable and we would not want to abandon such a system unless it was clear that: 1) the system had deficiencies that detracted from the evolution and maintenance of healthy democratic politics in the province, and 2) we were convinced that there was an alternative system that could be adopted that would speak to the identified deficiencies.

In an attempt to advance discussion about our electoral system the Assembly has identified the following basic advantages and disadvantages of the system as it operates in British Columbia. This points to features that Assembly members believe need to be central to an assessment of the system.

Strengths of the Current System:

- **LOCAL REPRESENTATION AND ACCOUNTABILITY**
The current system provides for individuals to be elected representing specific and identifiable areas of the province. This fosters a direct link between voters and their representatives and ensures that all areas of the province have a spokesperson in the legislature. This system allows politicians to speak authoritatively for their area, enables issues of local concern to be placed on the public agenda, and provides a mechanism for

voters to hold representatives directly accountable for their actions. All MLAs have equal standing in the legislature and share common obligations and relationships to the electorate.

- **STYLE OF GOVERNMENT AND REPRESENTATION**

The current system promotes the creation of majority governments that can claim an electoral mandate. These governments have a security of tenure that allows them to plan confidently for the life of the Legislative Assembly and to implement their program as they see fit. By stimulating winner-take-all competition, the electoral system fosters two-party competition and works to limit the place and influence of minor parties and marginal interests. Elections generally revolve on the issue of the choice of governments.

- **SIMPLICITY, FAMILIARITY AND TRANSPARENT COUNTING**

The single-member plurality system is familiar and straightforward. Voters are simply required to indicate their preferred candidate from the list of names presented. Winners are determined by a simple count of the ballots and are known almost immediately.

Weaknesses of the Current System:

- **LACK OF PROPORTIONALITY**

Our single-member plurality system is one in which there is no direct connection between the number of votes a party receives and the number of seats it wins in the Legislative Assembly. The system favours large parties over small ones, creating governments with ‘artificial’ majorities and depriving minority views from finding expression in the legislature. This tends to limit effective voter choice, leads to many votes not contributing to electing any MLA, and sometimes leads to parties with the most votes not winning an election.

- **GOVERNMENT-DOMINATED PARLIAMENTS**

The system fosters an adversarial style of two-party politics in which government domination of the legislature becomes standard practice. With strong party discipline this ensures centralized decision-making with no effective opportunity for the legislature to hold the government accountable between elections. The system cannot ensure a strong opposition and, with MLAs required to put party interests above those of their constituencies, local and minority interests are often excluded.

- **IMPACTS ON GOVERNANCE AND VOTERS**

Adversarial politics often result in sharp swings in public policy as newly elected governments often undo or reverse the programs of their predecessors. This style of politics contributes to a growing alienation of voters from the political process which has been reflected in falling voter turnout rates, especially among young voters.

4. Approaches to Alternative Electoral Systems

The Assembly has considered a wide range of alternative electoral systems and studied their impact in other democracies. It has given particular attention to the values that underlie the basic features of these other systems and their potential consequences for the style and character of British Columbia’s democracy. While it is difficult to predict in detail how any

other specific system would work in British Columbia, the Assembly is convinced that any alternative system it considers must reflect the values it believes are central to the political health of the province's democracy. At this point it draws attention to important defining features of electoral systems:

- LOCAL REPRESENTATION

Our tradition has long valued a system of representation that provides for local representation – for its politicians to speak for and answer to the distinctive communities that make up the whole province. Citizens believe it is important that the interests of their particular communities be represented in public debate and policy-making. This is accomplished when MLAs have an intimate knowledge of the communities they represent and the concerns of the people in them.

With elected politicians rooted in specific geographic areas, it is possible for voters to hold them directly accountable for their performance in defending the values and interests of their local constituents. Having a local representative gives individual citizens a direct personal channel into the government, a local contact they can use to obtain help or advance their concerns. The Assembly is aware that British Columbians in rural areas, and in locations far removed from the heavily populated Lower Mainland region, feel especially strongly that their concerns must struggle to be heard. It is sensitive to the reality that for them, a vigorous system of local representation remains a highly valued dimension of their political life. It anticipates that any reformed electoral system would need to maintain an element of effective local representation.

Creating an electoral system that ensures effective local representation is an important challenge. The practice of party discipline obliges MLAs to vote as their party decides, not always as their voters prefer. The Assembly is interested in considering electoral systems whose features help ensure that elected representatives are more responsive to the concerns and views of their constituents.

- PROPORTIONALITY

The Assembly believes it is important that the outcome of an election, in terms of the distribution of seats in the Legislature, should reflect the expressed intentions of citizens as expressed in their votes. This is the principle of proportionality – seats won should be proportional to votes won.

Beyond an acceptance of this basic principle, the Assembly has learned that there are a number of important reasons why British Columbians might want to consider moving to an electoral system based on proportional representation. Such systems typically ensure that more parties are able to compete successfully and so provide voters with more choice. A direct consequence is that more interests and groups are able to have their voices heard in a Legislature that is more reflective of the social composition of the electorate. Given the province's increasing diversity, this offers the possibility of more genuinely representative politics at a time when voter turnout is falling and apathy is rising among young British Columbians.

The Assembly is aware that proportional electoral systems are likely to end the dominance of one-party majority governments and lead to a more consensual, or at least coalitional, style of politics in which opposition and small party MLAs have the

opportunity to play a greater role in the government of the province. It believes that a move away from the highly charged adversarial politics that have characterized the province in recent decades might foster politics more in keeping with the values of contemporary British Columbians.

Most modern democracies incorporate some proportional element in their electoral systems. The Assembly is aware that by increasing the number of political parties such systems can alter the balance of forces in the legislature. To avoid excessive political fragmentation some consideration might have to be given to establishing a modest threshold that parties would be expected to meet before being guaranteed representation.

There are a number of possible proportional systems – some that exist in pure party-list form, others which combine with features of constituency-based systems in different ways. In terms of its basic value position the Assembly believes that many of these offer rich possibilities for British Columbia and deserve careful consideration. On the other hand, systems that are not responsive to the goal of increasing the proportionality of the system would seem to offer little in the way of advantage over the single-member plurality system we now use. In the same way, the choices offered voters are an important and integral part of any electoral system and the Assembly would not want to see it constrained.

The Assembly wants to hear from British Columbians. It wants to hear if they share its conviction that local representation needs to be an important element in the province's electoral system. It wants to hear if they agree with it that a more proportional system would better reflect the basic values of our province's population. It wants to hear what kind of choices they would like to see at the polls. And it is anxious to hear what kind of electoral system our fellow citizens believe can best express our common values.

We welcome feedback on these and any other aspect of the electoral system that British Columbians feel would contribute to our province's democratic process. We look forward to hearing a full expression of public views at our public hearings to be held across the province during May and June, and encourage formal submissions through our website or to the Assembly's office.

Morris J. Wosk Centre for Dialogue
March 21, 2004

For a full account of the materials used in the learning phase please consult our website. For a glossary, defining many of the technical terms used in describing and explaining electoral systems see: http://www.citizensassembly.bc.ca/public/learning_resources/glossary