



“This really is
power to the people.”

- Jack Blaney,
Chair, Citizens' Assembly

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Submission **KENNEDY-0740** (Online)

Submission By	Mr John Kennedy
Address	Burnaby, BC, Canada
Organization	
Date	20040623
Category	Democratic elections

Abstract

'The Seven Cent Solution': A proposal for assigning voting strength in the Legislature to reflect the proportion of votes won at elections, and to ensure that the party with the most votes forms the government. [6 pages]

Submission Content

THE SEVEN CENT SOLUTION: VOTE PROPORTIONAL REPRESENTATION

Summary

Wasted votes. Warped results. Unequal votes. The root of these problems lies in our conventions of assigning each seat a single vote, and having the party that won the most seats form the government. We need to have the party that won the most votes form the government. And we need to assign each seat an equal share of the Province-wide votes of the party which won that seat. The result would be near-perfect PR.

What People Want

People want to feel that they matter in the political system -- that their vote counts.

They want to feel that their vote counts as much as the next person's vote.

They want to feel that the election results in the Legislative Assembly are a fair and accurate representation of the votes they cast in the voting booth.

And they want their local representative to be an accessible person, whose job it is to help them, and who is accountable to them.

Now, people do not want to worry about a complicated new electoral system full of strange procedures, unforeseeable consequences, and quirky results -- they want the least amount of change that fixes the problems.

And, finally, they want an escape hatch -- they want to be able to get back to the old way, quickly and easily, if the new way does not work out well.

The Seven Cent Solution meets all of these needs.

The Seven Cent Solution.

The focus of this plan is votes rather than parties, the citizen instead of the politician. So, I call it Vote Proportional Representation, rather than Party Proportional Representation. In fact, though, it does give parties near-perfect proportional power in the Legislature. It does this through apportioning citizen votes to seats, rather than providing additional parliamentary one-vote seats. We divide instead of add.

The beauty of this plan is that we do not have to change anything on the ground for the citizen. The changes all happen in the Legislature. We get to keep our local representative. We get to keep our familiar riding boundaries. We get to keep our simple plurality ballot. And we still get to elect all our rulers rather than have any of them appointed by party bosses. It is the politicians who have to change the way they do things. It is only fair. The politicians are the problem. We are the solution.

I call this plan "The Seven Cent Solution" because it only involves seven small changes. But the best part is that these changes can be made or undone quickly and easily. If we do not like the kind of politics these changes make, we can change right back overnight. You can think of this as "the no muss, no fuss, no risk, free trial offer" of near-perfect proportional representation.

The Seven Cents

Instruct the Lieutenant Governor to invite the leader of the party which received the most votes in the general election to form the next government. Scathingly simple. This is the keystone idea of the plan. The rest of the "cents" flow from this one. The only change here is the word "votes" for the word "seats". The escape hatch? Change it back to "seats" and you return to what we have now, our one seat-one vote system.

2.

Where the leader of the party which received the most votes in the general election declines the invitation, or suffers a non-confidence vote, instruct the Lieutenant Governor to ask the leader of the party which received the next greatest number of votes in the general election to form the government. This provision anticipates a number of parties controlling about fifteen to thirty percent of the popular vote each. We should not be thrown into another general election just because one of these parties suffers a non-confidence vote. This provision requires the politicians to work out their differences within the walls of the Legislature. And it provides a measure of independence to the individual MLA.

With regard to stability, this provision technically gives us even more stability than we have now. Currently a Party enjoying less than fifty percent of the popular vote can suffer a non-confidence vote and precipitate another general election.

The Leader of the Opposition, of course, would be the Leader of the Party controlling the greatest number of votes amongst those Parties not forming the government.

3.

Instruct the Lieutenant Governor to call a general election every four years, forty-five days prior to polling day.

The purpose here is to provide regular elections and to avoid having Parties squabbling over when to have an election. Preset election dates treat all Parties fairly. Canadian practice indicates that about six to eight weeks is long enough for an election campaign.

4.

In the event that a seat is vacated before the end of the four year term, instruct the Lieutenant Governor to call a by-election within 90 days of the seat being vacated, except that the by-election will be waived where a general election is called within 180 days of the seat being vacated.

In a multi-party, proportional representation system, it would be inappropriate for a current

coalition to determine when a byelection should be held. This provision standardizes the procedure. The 180 day exception prevents the pointless expense of two, back to back elections in a riding.

5.

Instruct the Lieutenant Governor to call a general election in the event of a lost confidence vote, or succession of lost confidence votes, where the party or parties suffering that loss or losses, control in the Legislature more than fifty percent of the popular vote.

At some point an early election is justified. When a party, or some parties in a row, who control more than fifty percent of the popular vote cannot keep the support in the Legislature that they need to govern, then we need a new election. Clearly the politicians are "not playing well with others". And it is time to punish them.

This provision addresses the issue of stability under proportional representation. In fact it takes the issue of stability to its reasonable conclusion: Where leaders of parties controlling more than fifty percent of the vote cannot get the support of their followers, it is time to change the leaders, the followers, or both. This is remarkably more stability than we have now.

6.

Assign to each MLA an even share of the total Province-wide popular vote received by his or her party. That share constitutes the MLA's indivisible parliamentary vote on the floor of the Legislature. Thus each party would have power on the floor equal to its popular vote.

It is hard to be more proportional than an exact correspondence between popular vote and power on the Legislature floor. Needless to say, this would greatly magnify the importance of the citizen's vote in the eyes of the politician. In fact, it would tend to reverse the flow of power from the top down to the bottom up. No longer would we feel we were "electing our dictators".

In one blow, this provision would eliminate warped results, unequal votes, and most wasted votes. The "threshold" for a Party would be to get at least one member elected somewhere. And of course each Party would try to get as many votes as it could everywhere. Naturally, some parties will be unable to elect even a single member -- this is near-perfect proportionality. I will address the imperfections under "The Rest of the Wasted Votes".

I specified that the MLA's share be an "indivisible" parliamentary vote. Politicians tap dance and mealy-mouth enough as it is. Responsible government requires the MLA to take a clear stand on issues. In order to monitor, hold accountable, and maintain the integrity of the MLA's

I referred to the MLA's share as an "even" share. This is another small integrity issue -- the integrity of the voter's vote. The citizen's vote is the smallest unit of currency in the political system. It should be respected as indivisible. In any case, we want to avoid repeating decimals. And we especially want to avoid having important issues decided by microscopic fractions of a vote. We will usually get a remainder after dividing the percent of popular vote by the number of MLAs. The remainder should be given, one vote each, to the higher vote-getters in the party. In practice, the tiny difference will very rarely matter. So, the share is a near-equal share, an "even" share.

By-elections: When a by-election is called, the votes cast in the riding in the prior election will all be withdrawn from the parties' pooled votes. Then the by-election is held, and the new votes assigned to the parties' pools. The new MLA will be assigned an even share of his or her party's votes.

Crossing the Floor: Occasionally an MLA will want to change party affiliation and cross the floor. The MLA abandons the share of his or her current party's pool of votes. He or she carries the votes he or she actually won in the riding to the new party. What is now the MLA's old party has its pool reduced by the subtraction of his or her personal votes. These personal votes are added to the new party's pool, and then the MLA is assigned his equal share of his or her new party's votes.

7.

Wasted Votes, Proportionality and Independents: (A "wasted" vote is a vote that has not contributed to the election of a candidate. Under the plan proposed here, all the votes cast Province-wide for a party go into that party's pool of votes, including all of that party's "wasted" votes. In order to exercise those votes on the floor of the Legislature, that party has to elect at least one MLA. Obviously, not all of the small parties are going to be successful in electing even one candidate. Also, not all of the independent candidates are going to get elected either. So we have more wasted votes to tend to.) Treat all unsuccessful parties, unsuccessful independent candidates, and successful independent candidates as if they all belong to one party. Put all the votes cast for these groups and individuals into a common pool. Assign to each independent MLA an even share of that pool of votes. That share constitutes the independent MLA's indivisible parliamentary vote on the floor of the Legislature. In the event that there are no successful independent candidates, all of the votes in this pool shall be assigned proportionally to the vote pools of the successful Parties.

This proposal, of course, does not contribute to proportional representation as such. These wasted votes are not those of like-minded voters. On the other hand, if we do nothing with these wasted votes, they are completely wasted. This proposal is a nod to the importance and value of the citizen's vote. And it reassures the citizen that he can vote for whomever he pleases, and still not waste his vote. The only wasted votes left then would be spoiled ballots. Mechanically speaking a spoiled ballot is the equivalent of not voting, or voting for "none of the above".

But the most important purpose of this proposal is to encourage independent candidates. Loenen and others have mentioned the value of having independent voices in the Legislature. Not everyone who can make a valuable contribution to the community fits a party mold. If nothing else, it is occasionally refreshing to hear a politically incorrect maverick voice.

Of even greater value is the vast reservoir of talent, experience and knowledge we have in the community. There are all sorts of people who might be persuaded to add an independent voice, if they do not have to deal with the infighting of political parties. Consider former premiers, cabinet ministers, and mayors. And notable businesspeople, former labour leaders, journalists, academics, founders of movements, artists and visionaries. All of these will provide us with insights not available through the channels of political parties. Parties are trying to win power. Independents, because they have little chance of forming the government, can afford to tell the truth. It is a shame to waste such valuable contributions, as we do now, because an independent has next to no chance of being elected.

The Benefits

The first five of these small changes are administrative in character. Essentially they take powers away from the Premier, standardize procedures, and then hand the powers to the Lieutenant Governor. The sixth and seventh small changes are a new way of employing citizens' votes. Although these are small changes, they will have a profound effect on our political landscape.

- Every citizen's vote will actually count on the Legislature floor.
- There will be no wasted votes
- Every citizen and politician will be acutely aware of the value of the citizen's vote.

- Voter turnout will likely rise markedly
- During an election campaign there will be fierce competition for, and hot pursuit of, the citizen's vote
- Winning an election will no longer be winning a licence to do whatever you want
- Winning an election will be winning individual citizen's votes so as to accumulate enough power to have a significant influence on legislation
- The flow of power will reverse from the top down to the bottom up
- Legislation will be framed through consensus and cooperation, and with an eye to the voter
- The Parties will be more issue-oriented
- Young voter turnout will rise dramatically because parties will form to address their issues and capture their votes
- Some politicians may actually be persuaded to tell the truth in order to win the youth vote
- Each Party will try to run in every riding
- Each person's vote will count exactly as much as the next person's vote
- Reasonable equality in area in rural ridings, and in population in urban ridings, will be all that is required

We can keep our familiar riding boundaries and rarely change them

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In the future, we can make smaller rural ridings so as to give rural citizen's the service, voice, and influence they deserve

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We get to keep our local representative

-

We still translate votes into seats the same way, our simple First Past The Post ballot

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We still elect all our rulers, rather than having any of them appointed by Party bosses

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The formal changes all happen in the Legislature

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There is no complicated, quirky new system for the citizen to contend with

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There are no warped, one seat-one vote, election results in the Legislature

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There is an exact correspondence of popular vote to parliamentary vote which results in near-perfect vote proportional representation

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There will be regular general elections

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There will be prompt by-elections to maintain local representation

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Because it would be difficult to cause an early election, we will have even more stability than we have now

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The MLA will enjoy a measure of independence from his Party, because he knows voting

against his Party will not likely bring the government down

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While passing the mantle of government to Parties, the plan promotes valuable contributions to government by independent MLAs

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The whole plan can be quickly and easily reversed if we do not like the kind of politics it produces.

Caveat: Learn from New Zealand's Mistakes

Make sure any referendum on a change of electoral system includes within it a provision for a follow up referendum to confirm, enhance, alter, reformulate, deny, or revert from any change in electoral systems.

Also, seeing here how many profound effects can be wrought by such small changes, should give one pause about making large changes.

Thank you for your time and efforts, particularly during such a wonderfully hot summer.

NB: I ask those who read this submission to please make a submission themselves. Perhaps something unique. Perhaps in support of The Seven Cent Solution -- it needs to attract a little attention versus MMP.