

**British Columbia Citizens' Assembly on Electoral Reform  
2nd Weekend : Session 2 (Saturday afternoon)**

**Political Parties and Party Competition**

**OR**

***The pervasive, perennial problem of political parties preempting personal preferences***

We can't get very far in discussing electoral systems without coming up against the question of political parties. Indeed one of our basic criteria by which we assess them, fairness or proportionality, is explicitly cast in terms of political parties and the relationship between their vote and seat shares.

One of the striking realities of sustainable electoral democracy is that, in practice, there are almost no cases where political parties have not emerged to organize and manage it. This is equally true of parliamentary systems such as we have in Canada and the quite different congressional systems based on the American model.

It is true there are a few cases of non-party democracy – the Assemblies in northern Canada are striking examples – but these are relatively few and far between and tend to exist in very small scale societies.

Public opinion poll results suggest that Canadians are ambivalent about political parties:

- 69% think “*those elected to parliament soon lose touch with the people*”
- 74% claim “*we could solve most of our big national problems if we brought them back to the grassroots level*”
- 82% believe “*we would have better laws if members of parliament were able to vote for they thought was best rather than having to vote the same way as their party*”

BUT

- 69% agree “*without political parties there cannot be true democracy*”, AND
- 18% have been a member of a political party at some time

So this raises a number of questions we need to be clear on:

- Why do political parties exist everywhere?
- What do they do?
- Might we have an electoral politics with no parties? (the *NOTA* option)

- How does the electoral system shape the number and kind of parties, and party competition, we have?
- What kind of parties do we have in Canada under our current system?
- Can we imagine what changing the electoral system might do to our political parties, and what that would mean for our political life?

## 1. POLITICAL PARTIES

Political parties exist in virtually every electoral democracy and, not surprisingly, they do many of the same things in them. Typically they:

- Articulate and package ideas and interests
- Recruit candidates for office
- Campaign on an identifiable platform
- Structure voters into recognizable blocks
- Organize and operate governments and oppositions

In doing these things they provide an organizational solution to important problems that come up in running a system of electoral democracy.

### *The Politicians' problems*

:

- Finding a way to assemble an electoral support base
- Providing an instrument for coordinating legislative action
- Defining the public agenda
- Organizing a government and managing its activity

### *The Citizens' problems:*

- Finding a way to turn elections into a collective decision-making activity
- Building an organization that can recruit and train leadership
- Establishing an instrument for holding governors accountable

Political parties have proved to be the solution to each of these political problems. We can think of complex systems of elections and governments rather like major products or services needed by the community. Political parties are rather like the public utilities created to deliver a special product – democratic government.

We provide electricity to the society by creating a public utility to create and deliver it. In BC it is BC Hydro that is charged with doing this.

We provide for democratic competition as a major public good and service by encouraging political parties to contest open, free elections. In our system the legislature connects voters to government. It is the political parties, operating in both arenas –popular elections and then the legislature– that provides the human connection between the two.

Like public utilities, political parties monopolize their important activities and this is one of the important reasons we think they need to be regulated.

## 2. PARTY DISCIPLINE

*How do parties manage to do all these things?* The answer is that they are disciplined –their members:

- Agree to campaign on the same agreed set of policies
- Work, and vote together as a team in the legislature
- Defend each other and their leadership

When parties are not disciplined then they are not able to provide the system with all the advertised benefits.

If candidates do not campaign on an agreed set of policies to which they are committed, or stand willing to defend their party's record:

- Elections lose their collective dimension
- Governments will not be able to claim a mandate for an agenda
- Voters cannot hold governments accountable

If members of the legislature do not vote together as a bloc:

- Governments will not have an enduring political base
- Legislative action will be conducted on the basis of day-by-day bargaining

Party discipline means that elections are essentially choices between a limited number of teams: electoral and parliamentary politics is a team game. Most of the individual members of the teams have only a limited and well-defined role to play and must stick to the team's game plan, rather than strike out on their own, if the party is to be successful. Political parties don't like independent minded members for good reason—it diverts attention and energy from their basic objectives.

*2 points to note:*

The logic of this argument is that there is not much room for *independents* in our electoral politics. Few are successful at getting elected and almost none are able to participate in the governing process.

Those who advocate a system with no political parties (the NOTA option) are essentially advocating transforming the parliamentary systems into a completely different system of government, one in which elections would lose much of their collective government-choosing capacity.

- 83% of Canadians say *we would be better off if MPs voted the way their constituents thought best rather than the party line*

Party discipline works against the ability of local representatives to vote as their constituents wish in the legislature. If all MLAs were to do so then we would be in the position of having a legislature full of independents. This suggests that the powerful desire of Canadians to have their elected representative vote in accordance with opinion in the constituency runs head-on into one of the most basic features of party politics. This tension persists because disciplined parties organize electoral competition, but politicians continue to be elected to represent individual districts.

Political parties often bear the imprint of their origins – some are the product of politicians, others of citizen organizing.

*Parties created by politicians* typically have a loose structure and reflect the interests of politicians trying to build an organization that will help them win (or hold) office but offering the minimum constraints on their action. These parties are typically centred in the legislature and tend to limit their external activity, as much as possible, to vote gathering. For these parties the imperative for discipline comes from politicians' determined to keep their supporters on a short leash.

Canada's traditional Liberal and Progressive Conservative parties are good examples of this sort of party. In BC, the Social Credit party emerged in the early 1950s out of the political ambitions WAC Bennett and associated politicians and persisted as long as it succeeded as an instrument for winning elections.

*Parties created by citizens* typically grow out of social groups or movements determined to make the government pay attention to their interests by defining the political agenda and electing their members to office. These parties generally have a clearly defined set of goals and objectives and expect those they elect to represent them to implement their policies when in power. For these parties the imperative for discipline comes from members' determined to keep their politicians on a short leash.

In Canada, parties like the New Democrats, which developed out of the Co-operative Commonwealth Federation which itself was spawned by socialist and farmers' groups in the Great Depression, or the Parti québécois, which is rooted in the separatist movement in Quebec, are examples of this type of party.

In practice, political parties that operate in the same political community, competing with one another under the same rules, often tend to come to look and behave like one another. Their different origins may account for subtle differences in their organizational practices and political instincts, but the pressures of competition leads them to copy what their opponents do successfully while dropping distinctive features that don't pay electoral dividends.

Parties exist to allow politicians and citizens to operate a competitive electoral process across the entire community – in our case the province  
 Inevitably the parties will be shaped by the electoral process that we use

### 3. THE NUMBER OF PARTIES

*How many political parties does any political community need?*

There is no simple answer to this question that can be worked out with the appropriate mathematical formula. There might be as many parties as there are politicians or citizens ready to create them. At present there are 41 political parties registered with Elections BC. In practice we can expect that the electoral market place will take care of a number of these parties – the Millionaires Party (appropriately headquartered in Gold River) or the Bald Eagle Party seem unlikely to be taken too seriously or win many votes. But the electoral system itself is likely to have a considerable impact on the number of parties that exist as viable and significant players in the political life of the province.

Electoral systems adapt to the realities of the community they are in: as a general practice it seems that –

*Winner take all systems:*

- reward large parties with a bigger share of seats than votes
- penalize smaller parties by giving them a smaller share of seats than votes
- encourage parties to amalgamate
- lead to two parties dominating electoral competition

*Proportional systems:*

- allow parties to claim a share of seats proportional to their electoral support
- facilitate a larger number of parties being represented in the legislature
- provide the opportunity for new parties to emerge
- lead to multi-party competition

An important question then is: “*Do we want to limit the number of parties?*” – which amounts to trying to force politics into a pattern of an either/or choice.

If so, then a winner take all system – a plurality or majority system – will help do this. We can see it in action in our national politics right now. The splintering of the Canadian electorate into a number of parties allowed the Liberals to win without a majority of the vote. Frustrated by the prospect of continually losing, the Alliance and Progressive Conservative parties have interpreted the logic of the electoral systems to say they can only do better, can only hope to win, if they combine into one party, even though many of them didn’t like it when they were together in the 1980s!

They wouldn't be in this strategic position if we had a proportional system. Assuming that voters had voted the same way in the previous election, both parties would have each won a larger share of seats, together almost as many as the Liberals who would not have had a majority. In that situation they would not have much of an incentive to abandon their distinctive identities and modify their policy goals.

This logic works very powerfully in the smaller arena of provincial politics. In virtually all the provinces 2-party politics is the norm. Those who try to buck it are generally only successful if they are able to displace one of the two existing parties. But to do so they often have to become a replica of the very party they replaced.

#### 4. THE KIND OF PARTIES

This discussion of the impact of the electoral system on the number of parties suggests that it is not just the number of parties that is influenced by the electoral rules. They can also shape the kinds of parties that exist, and from that the kind of political competition we have.

Recall our Alliance-Progressive Conservative example. The two parties existed because their supporters believed rather different things about:

- ❖ the way politics should be organized
- ❖ appropriate social policies for the country
- ❖ the nature of federal-provincial & English-French relations
- ❖ the role of the central government

Operating separately, they were able to articulate competing visions and offer Canadians distinctive political alternatives

In coming together they are going to have to find ways to compromise their differences and so inevitably will develop more of a brokerage approach to politics, offering something to everyone (it is everyone's votes they are going after). In doing so they will become more like the Conservatives of the 1980s. And that should make them question the whole point of the original split into two separate parties and the conflict between them over the past decade.

If you shrink the number of parties you are likely to make them more general organizations, with less sharply defined policy positions and a more pragmatic approach to electoral politics and governing. Often called "catch-all" parties, they become great vote vacuum machines using whatever attachment is necessary to suck up votes.

When there is no electoral inducement to combine, parties can maintain separate identities with distinctive policies. And discontented members are always free to leave and start another party if they think that too many compromises have been made. Inevitably these kinds of parties have an incentive to establish a more ideological approach to politics as they seek to establish their position as the representative of a particular interest or set of policy

preferences. This politics is more likely to be one where parties concentrate on maintaining their existing support base rather than reaching out to absorb others.

**2-party and multi-party competition is not simply a matter of numbers. The differences also reflect a different kind of party and a different competitive dynamic between them.**

*2-party competition:*

- simple choice between two similar parties which seek to embrace as many voters as possible
- elections tend to determine who is in government
- much of the inevitable bargaining over policies takes place within the individual parties and is governed by their own processes and rules

*multi-party competition:*

- voters have wide choice among parties with explicit, often ideological views
- elections record the distribution of preferences in the society
- bargaining over policies takes place between the parties in the legislature after the election results are in

These two kinds of parties and party competition are general types and no one system is likely to be a pure version of one or the other – although some of the Canadian provinces come close to being good examples of pure 2-party competition.

**ELECTORAL SYSTEM CHANGE → PARTY & COMPETITIVE CHANGES**

To illustrate this relationship we can briefly consider what happened in *New Zealand* in the last decade.

	<i>Before</i>	<i>After</i>
Electoral system	Plurality	Proportional
# of parties in Parliament	2 Big (Labour vs. National)	2 Big parties & 5 Small
Party styles	Broad appeal	Broad appeal; nurturing special interests; personality organizations
Elections	Choice of government	Reflecting preferences
Governments	1-party majority	Parliamentary coalitions

## 5. CANADIAN POLITICAL PARTIES

Canadian parties have developed quite unique styles. For the most part they are classic examples of what happens in a plurality system – rewards for two catch-all parties and electoral failure for others.

Our parties have managed to find a distinctive approach to reconciling the impulses towards party discipline found in most systems with the opportunities for the representation of local interests that seems built into a system that elects MLAs and MPs from single-member districts.

Canadian party organizations involve a balancing of:

- national party discipline
- local organizational autonomy

Elected politicians realize that they are subject to strict party discipline when in the legislature. Voting the party line allows no real freedom allowed to vote their conscience, or the preferences of their constituents.

In a country as diverse as ours this domination by the centre doesn't go down well and so local organizations have wide-spread autonomy to run their own affairs, and this included determining who will be their candidate and representative.

This is not a perfect trade-off but it does allow enough flexibility for the big brokerage parties to recruit and keep active members. Building this political bargain (between the interests of the centre and the locals) into an organization is no easy task. The solution has been to create parties that look remarkably like big franchise systems.

*The central organization:*

- defines the product – leadership and policies
- does the big advertising – the election campaign
- supports its local branches – provides managerial and organizational tools

*The local association:*

- builds a local outlet – investing local resources
- creates a local market – identifies a candidate
- harvests support – mobilizes voters on election day

This is not to say Canadian parties are little more than the political equivalent of hamburger chains, coffee outlets or automobile distributors. But the framework is similar and it does allow for the development of a good deal of autonomy on both sides. The national party is pretty free to work on policy issues, the local associations to decide who they want to represent them.



Internal party democracy thrives as long as both sides respect each others' space and prerogatives. When one side tries to interfere (usually its the centre telling locals what to do or who to choose) then the stage is set for a good deal of internal party conflict.

Changing the electoral system, and hence the kinds of parties, would almost inevitably force the parties to adopt new organizational methods. Of particular interest to party members and electors is the *candidate selection process*.

In Canada, at present, it is largely left in the hands of ordinary party members who come together at local meetings to choose their candidate before every election. We take this for granted – it is not the common practice in most democracies.

*Party list systems* require a party to submit a list (or sometimes several regional lists) of candidates. Who makes up the list is critical. The need to coordinate party strategy means it is generally someone in the central party leadership. But that puts enormous power in the hands of the few who control the list.

*Preferential vote systems* can lead parties to nominate more candidates than they reasonably expect to get elected and this tends to leave just who will represent the party in the hands of the electorate. Voters might like this, but for a party trying to present a united front, or manage to take part in a coalition government, it can mean that they are not able to recruit the people they want or limit the amount of inter-party fighting that goes on.

This consideration can take us back to the vexing question of party discipline for internal party democracy can act as a counter-weight to centralized discipline. Electoral systems that facilitate increased voter or party member choice in the selection of the politicians who will make up the party in the legislature may provide the opportunity to create some checks on the pervasiveness of party discipline.

By shaping critical activities like candidate recruitment, electoral systems can go a long way in regulating the internal affairs of parties. As the public utilities of democracy it seems reasonable that there should be some regulation of their activities. The recent shenanigans around the manipulation of party memberships in the national Liberal party suggest that they can't always be trusted to run their own affairs fairly or reasonably.

But the parties are the instruments that free citizens ultimately have to use to control the government so it is a difficult question as to how far regulation of the parties' internal practices ought to go. Should parties with different political visions all be expected to operate in the same way? Just what kinds of parties do we want, and need, our electoral system to deliver?

6. SOME QUESTIONS

Does it matter how many political parties we have?

Do we want an electoral system that makes it easy for new parties to grow?

Is multi-party or 2-party competition better for BC?

How should candidates be chosen, and by whom?