

PRESENTATION SUMMARY

NANAIMO PUBLIC HEARING DATED
27 MAY 2004 AT COAST BASTION HOTEL

THE FOLLOWING INFORMATION IS A BRIEF SUMMARY OF THE PRESENTATION TO THE CITIZENS' ASSEMBLY ON ELECTORAL REFORM. IT ATTEMPTS TO CAPTURE THE KEY ISSUES AND ARGUMENTS THAT WERE PRESENTED AND DISCUSSED DURING THE PUBLIC HEARING. IN SOME INSTANCES, THE PRESENTER HAS ALSO MADE A SUBMISSION TO THE ASSEMBLY AND THIS IS ACCESSIBLE VIA THE WEBSITE AT WWW.CITIZENSASSEMBLY.BC.CA BY CLICKING ON "GET INVOLVED". IF SUCH A SUBMISSION IS AVAILABLE, IT WILL BE NOTED AT THE END OF THIS REPORT.

Julian West

DESCRIPTION OF PRESENTATION

‘Voter choice’ should be given consideration along with ‘proportionality’ leading to a focus on systems such as STV or fully open lists. Systems which facilitate the emergence of new political parties should also be prepared to regulate those parties to ensure the public’s interest in open political participation and democracy.

KEY THEMES

Julian West told the hearing that he had become convinced that extended voter choice is as important as broad proportionality. He advocated a Single Transferable Vote electoral system, with some modifications to suit the geography of British Columbia. Dr West advised that the district magnitude of constituencies should differ in urban and rural BC, with five member districts in most urban ridings and two or three member districts in northern ridings. He also argued that provincial electoral districts should correspond with municipal and regional district boundaries to harmonise jurisdiction between the two levels of government.

Dr West recommended a modification to the classical STV model in order to divide each electoral district into a number of geographic sections, or circuits, equal to the district magnitude of the riding. This would preserve much of the local representation of the current single-member constituency. He also recommended that parties should not be able to limit the number of party candidates seeking election in each district, to minimize the party leader’s control over candidate selection. Dr West spoke in favour of the creation of a separate electoral list for members of First Nations, with members of the electoral list electing members to the legislature in one three-member province-wide STV electoral district.

He clarified that this system, using STV in both rural and urban areas, was superior to the combination of urban STV ridings and rural Alternative Vote ridings because the use of circuits gives all voters a designated local representative, rural ridings gain some proportionality, and it reduces the potential for one party to sweep the rural districts. Dr West also drew a number of comparisons between his STV electoral system and MMP, arguing that STV more accurately represents voter’s preferences by allowing them to select the candidate they prefer, rather than this selection being made by the party, and that STV with circuits would be less disruptive than MMP because it does not involve increasing the size of the ridings.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Julian West recommended that introduction of the STV electoral system, with modifications to suit the geography of British Columbia.

Quote: “The emphasis should be on allowing voters to select their representatives, not on finding ways for political parties to make the choice for them.”

QUESTIONS, ANSWERS AND COMMENTS FROM THE PANEL

There were three members of the panel who sought clarification on elements of the presentation.

Q	You mention that we must impose accountability on parties, how would you plan on implementing that suggestion?
A	I have nine recommendations in my submission, and the first is the creation of a permanent and non-partisan Democratic Commission, to review and enhance democracy. For example, the Commission could consider issues such as the introduction of internet voting, and lowering the voting age, as well as acting as a body of appeal where people can challenge party behaviour.
Q	How would any system benefit from extra division into circuits?
A	I'm not sure if you're clear on my proposal. STV uses multimember districts, for example there might be three members elected in the Kootenays, but circuits divide the Kootenays region into three districts to ensure identifiable local representation.
Q	Can you speak further on how you feel this would increase proportionality?
A	With an STV system it is very unlikely that you'll get three members elected from same party, so more parties will be represented in the legislature. The system I have proposed would be as proportional as any other STV system.
Q	But it's not purely proportional, such as in a pure-PR system?
A	I think we need to free our minds from a very narrow definition of proportionality. For example, MMP directly represents the first party preferences of all voters. But voters have more than one preference and an ordinal ballot allows people to express more nuanced preferences. I don't think voters are only concerned with the proportion of seats held by one political party: I think people in parties are concerned about this but that voters are more concerned about voter choice.

Comment from panel: There were no further comments from the panel.

QUESTIONS, ANSWERS AND COMMENTS FROM THE AUDIENCE

Following this presentation quite a few members of the audience had questions.

Q	Does this system eliminate the disproportionality of rural versus urban votes?
A	I think that for any system that involves districting there is the capacity for the Boundaries Commission to alter this distribution and ensure equal distribution on the basis of population. This could be addressed under FPP as well.
Q	How does this work for a fledgling party such as the Greens?
A	STV is used in the Australian Senate and in Tasmania, and Greens have been elected in both houses. If there were five-member districts then a party would need roughly one sixth of the vote to be elected and I think the Greens in BC would be able to achieve this.
Q	You mention not having any restriction on number of candidates standing in each party. Will this affect proportionality?
A	Say the party stands 10 candidates, as long as voters give a sufficient number of preferences to party Y, before another party, these votes will effectively coalesce on at least one candidate. You're effectively having a primary on the day of the election. Instead of having party members select the candidate, you're letting all the voters who support that party decide which candidate they like the most.

Comment: There were no further comments from the audience.

SUBMISSION: YES