

PRESENTATION SUMMARY

PORT MCNEILL PUBLIC HEARING DATED
25 MAY 2004 AT THE HAIDA WAY
MOTOR INN

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.

Gerry Furney

DESCRIPTION OF PRESENTATION

A discussion of the difficulty of representing rural ridings in BC, and a proposal for a preferential voting system with single-member districts.

KEY THEMES

Gerry Furney is the Mayor of Port McNeill but told the hearing that he was speaking as a private citizen. He argued that the Assembly's mandate should not be limited to looking at the method for translating votes into seats but should also consider the capacity of an MLA to actually represent his or her constituents. Mr Furney explained that it is far more difficult to represent a rural riding than an urban riding, due to the difficulties of distance, the number of communities and the diverse range of interests within a rural riding. He argued that this difficulty discourages people from standing as candidates in rural areas. Having observed the voting system in Ireland where voters can indicate their preferences, he believes the Irish system is worth considering in BC because it is fairer than the current system. Mr Furney explained the operation of the Single Transferable Vote (STV) system in Ireland, but proposed that single-member ridings should be retained in British Columbia.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Gerry Furney recommended the introduction of a preferential voting system with single-member districts in British Columbia.

Quote: "It is much more difficult to represent a rural riding, with large distances to be traveled and a diverse range of interests to be represented."

QUESTIONS, ANSWERS AND COMMENTS FROM THE PANEL

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

Q	With regard to your choice of the Irish system, how important do you think it is to have a fairly simple ballot or can it be more complex? How do you think the electorate will react to a more complex ballot?
A	Any ballot, if the voter thinks about it carefully before filling it in, can be a bit confusing. It can already be a bit misleading if the order of the ballot favours one candidate over the other. In the US they often have to choose between dozens of people. Generally, I think we have to respect the voter, even though not everyone votes. We need to trust the voter and generally, I think that people make intelligent decisions. We also need some education

	to accompany any new system.
Q	One of the systems we looked at was a system where they randomised the ballot so that no one person was always on the top. What do you think of that sort of system?
A	That would be an excellent idea.
Q	The preferential system that you speak of, we used that system in the municipal election in Nanaimo, and the unfortunate side effect is that the winner is often the least popular candidate. This is misleading because being the winning candidate implies that you are the most popular person.
A	That's a very good point.
Q	Do you feel that the distance situation that you find in Port McNeill is attributable only to this area? I think it's common to all of BC and all of Canada. How do you suggest we deal with this?
A	I suggest that we increase the size of city ridings because city ridings are generally dealing with the same issues, for example immigration, employment and traffic, whereas a rural MP or MLA must understand far more issues, forestry, mining, agriculture, and tourism. I would make the country ridings much smaller and the city ridings bigger. I'm not in favour of having any more MLAs.
Q	Do you feel confident in the Citizens' Assembly process?
A	I have attended some sessions at the Fraser Institute hosted by the Gordon Gibson and heard some very good sessions. I heard one gentleman, Nick Loenen who was very impressive and I'm very confident in the whole process.
Q	Do you have an opinion on run-off elections?
A	It would be a fair way of doing it, but it would drag out the election quite a bit and I think that would make it more difficult for the government to get on with the job. If instead you gave people three choices so they could express their first, second and third preferences, then I think it would be an expression of the candidate with the broadest support.
Q	Or else there could be a caretaker government to allow a

	transition of government while that is being sorted out?
A	Well, my own preference is for a system where you can vote one, two or three.

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	Your mandate is to maintain the number of seats in the legislature, but that means that a mixed system is ruled out by this process because you can't add any top-up seats.
A	(Answered by facilitator) It is possible to do it, but it would require reducing the number of ridings. For example, we could have a mixed system where 50 seats would be elected in ridings and 29 would be elected proportionally.
Q	Increasing urban seats and making rural seats smaller raises the question of fairness. It seems to me that we would be devaluing the vote, and it would become remarkably unfair and unacceptable. If I were an urban person I would feel disenfranchised so I don't think that's a good solution for the problem. Did you take that into account?
A	The quality of the representation is more important than numerical representation. If my MLA has to travel so far to get to the legislature then the quality of the representation is reduced. So I think on the basis of equal quality representation we could justify changing the size of the ridings. The number of interests, and the distances in a city riding are much less.
Q	In terms of the preferential ballot, which we had in the 1950s, that's something that we're all familiar with because we're voting for individuals and we do that in union elections and municipal elections. But our political culture and history in BC is one of political parties, and we aggregate our views through political parties and campaign for a platform that reflects that common ground. So it's the ideas that are in contest, not the individuals. The individuals are the ones that are expressing the ideas and arguing in favour of those ideas. It's fundamentally

	different to elect an individual and to elect a party. So do you really think that a preferential system works with a competition that is structured around political parties?
A	That's a tough one. There's no requirement for the person to make three selections, so I can see a situation where a person giving one vote to a particular party may not feel they can support any other party. The other point about parties generally – we all recognize that originally all representatives were individuals until they began to recognize some common interests and work together. A group of independents governing the country could not work any more, so I take your point about parties being central to our system.
Q	We have so many isolated community concerns in the province at the moment. Is there any way that we could have a system where we could take representatives from each municipal government and put them in the legislature?
A	<p>(Facilitator) Within the constraints of our mandate – that any electoral system that may be proposed by the Assembly must be consistent with the Constitution of Canada and the Westminster parliamentary system, and must retain 79 seats – we can come up with a made in BC solution. If you look at our website you'll see a number of submissions that propose new systems for BC. I would also encourage you to write down your thoughts and put in a submission.</p> <p>(Presenter) Any input from municipal governments would be valuable, because they have been elected by the toughest voters – the voters that actually know you personally. As a municipal representative, I like the idea of being consulted. But I don't think we can second guess the Assembly.</p>

Comment: There were no further comments from the audience.

SUBMISSION: NO