

PRESENTATION SUMMARY

PRINCE GEORGE PUBLIC HEARING DATED
10 MAY 2004 AT THE PRINCE GEORGE
CIVIC CENTRE

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.

Maxine Armstrong

DESCRIPTION OF PRESENTATION

My presentation will be in support of proportional representation.

KEY THEMES

Maxine Armstrong argued that people don't feel that their votes count or all that all votes are equal under the current voting system. She argued that we need to address declining voter turnout in the province, as well as the under-representation of women and ethnic minorities. She also spoke of the need to find a way to promote consensus-based government. Mrs Armstrong argued that the distorted electoral outcomes in the 1996 and 2001 BC elections have reduced voter turnout because people see that the election results do not reflect the way the province has voted. She suggested that proportional representation provides a solution for declining youth turnout because voter turnout has increased in almost every system which has adopted PR.

Mrs Armstrong explained that we need to improve the representation of women and minority ethnic groups in the legislature to make our democracy effective and inclusive and to accurately represent the diversity of province. She stated that the lowest representation of women and ethnic minorities among democracies are both found in FPP systems. In contrast, list systems are more likely to result in more women in the legislature.

Mrs Armstrong argued that the majority of British Columbians support a system of proportional representation. She explained that PR would improve the representation of a diverse range of social groups and lead to more balanced consensual government. Mrs Armstrong argued that British Columbians would prefer legislative compromise and negotiation rather than the extreme policy swings, ineffective opposition and lack of accountability of the current system.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Maxine Armstrong reiterated the seven recommendations made by the BC Nurse Union in their submission to the Assembly.

- 1) That the Citizens' Assembly reject the current model of electing MLAs used in BC.
- 2) That the Citizens' Assembly bring forward the concept of PR as the centerpiece of proposed electoral reform in BC.
- 3) That in-depth consideration be given to the usage of an MMP system of PR in BC.
- 4) That the public be engaged in the Citizens' Assembly review of a possible MMP system of PR that could be used in the province of BC.
- 5) That a reasonable threshold for representation under a BC PR system be utilized.
- 6) That the number of MLA seats under a BC PR system be a fixed number of seats.

- 7) That the Citizens' Assembly recommend that a 50 per cent plus one, or a simple majority, be the measure utilized in the question regarding electoral reform that is put forward to British Columbians on May 17, 2005.

QUESTIONS, ANSWERS AND COMMENTS FROM THE PANEL

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

Q	Do you think that it is important for you to have a simple ballot?
A	Yes, but we also need an education campaign for any new electoral system.
Q	PR systems create larger constituencies. Is this an acceptable trade-off?
A	That's a very difficult question that the assembly will have to deal with. But I think people will accept that sort of trade-off if they realize that their vote counts.
Q	Is it important to have a specific local MLA?
A	Yes, that's why I've recommended an MMP system.
Q	Do you favour a particular electoral threshold for an MMP system, and if so why?
A	A five per cent threshold, so that people don't feel that there will be hundreds and hundreds of different parties in the legislature.

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

QUESTIONS, ANSWERS AND COMMENTS FROM THE AUDIENCE

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

Q	Do you think this will affect party line voting?
A	Yes I do because people can vote for a candidate and for a different party whose philosophy they follow.
Q	It seems to me that a PR system gives the party bureaucracy who set the lists complete power over who sits in the legislature.

A	Well, if parties put unpopular candidate on those lists then they're not going to get elected.
Q	But if I happen to favour one party and I don't like the list that they have, what choice do I have. Why can't we have an open list?
A	We could have either a closed or an open list. I share some of your concerns.
Q	I don't understand how PR will increase representation by women and ethnic groups. Can you explain that please?
A	(Answered by a member of the panel) If I may, in a proportional system it would be up to the parties to offer more candidates from diverse backgrounds. They know that they'll get more votes if they offer more candidates from women and minority ethnic groups to increase the balance. The party can list women and ethnic groups on the ballot.

Comments from the Audience:

“A closed list perverts democracy but an open list helps to maintain a democratic climate.”

“The problem I have is that more power would go to urban areas under PR.”

SUBMISSION: NO