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.

John Rustad

The benefits of preferential balloting versus the pitfalls of proportional representation.

KEY THEMES

John Rustad argued that there is no question that our current system needs to change but that there are trade-offs involved in the choice of an alternative electoral system. He recommended that the Assembly consider two particularly important issues as they evaluate alternative systems: geographic representation and local representation. Mr Rustad argued that geographic representation is one of the greatest assets of our current system. He explained that it is impossible for an MLA to really understand local needs and to defend local interests when legislation is drafted without first hand knowledge of the area. Mr Rustad also strongly supported local representation, where representatives live in the region, have a lot personal contact with people in the region and are regularly available to people in their riding.

He opposed the introduction of a PR system because of the danger of losing geographic and local representation. Increasing district size will reduce access to MLAs because of the extra traveling distance for face to face contact. Mr Rustad argued that PR will not address voter alienation in rural BC which produces the majority of GDP in the province but has fewer representatives because of smaller population. He was also concerned about the possibility for party lists to favour 'old boys' clubs and the loss of the ability to recall an MLA. He predicted that under PR new parties would be formed based on religion and race, rendering the legislature fractured and ineffective.

Mr Rustad recommended preferential voting as a solution for BC. A preferential voting system would preserve geographical and local representation, as well as requiring a representative to win a majority of the vote plus one. He argued that this system would eliminate vote splitting between competing candidates in riding, encourage more political parties to run candidates, provide more options for voters and remove the need to vote for "the lesser of two evils." He acknowledged that preferential voting would not address the concerns of minorities and suggested augmenting the system through additional seats for any party winning more than 15 per cent of the vote. Mr Rustad also suggested a tax incentive for voters in order to increase voter turnout.

RECOMMENDATIONS

John Rustad recommended the adoption of a preferential voting system (Alternative Vote) in BC, with a possible provision for additional seats for any party winning more than 15 per cent of the vote.

QUESTIONS, ANSWERS AND COMMENTS FROM THE PANEL

A member of the panel sought clarification on elements of the presentation.

Q	Do you think we could combine systems with some proportionality and our current system to still maintain geographical and local representation?
A	Yes, but this will require us to create larger electoral zones, and this could be risky.

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	Your concept of paying people to vote is interesting. It could be more effective to pay people to register to vote. Currently you are unable to register to vote if you are homeless, so paying them to register could also provide an incentive?
A	That's an interesting idea, but the main problem is actually getting people to the polls.
Q	Do you think that ridings being based on population is a good way of representing people geographically or do you think we should have fixed boundaries?
A	I think we need to be able to adjust for population movements over the years, otherwise ridings can become skewed.
Q	Would we rather have informed voters or people just showing up for the money?
A	Getting people to participate will give them an incentive to get informed. Currently, people do not necessarily cast an informed ballot, it is more based on name recognition. Ideally, voter information needs to come through education.
Q	Could you briefly list the dangers of PR?
A	The greatest danger is that we risk losing local and geographic representation. For example, the North East and the North West have radically different interests, and different economies.
Q	Doesn't MMP address that?

A	It tends to create an imbalance if parties do not run a balanced number of candidates from different areas. I think it's better to have some reasonable representation across the province rather than to have a system that represents on the basis of major population bases or ideology.
Q	What is the difference between geographical and local representation?
A	Well the current riding of Prince George-Cariboo is an example of geographical representation but it is so large that we can hardly call it local representation.

Comment: There were no comments from the audience.

SUBMISSION: NO