

## A Preliminary Statement to the People of British Columbia



**T**he Citizens' Assembly on Electoral Reform has completed the first phase of its work and eagerly looks forward to hearing the views of all British Columbians. We have organized public hearings to be held in communities all over the province during May and June. In this report we indicate what we have accomplished to date and provide a preliminary assessment of the strengths and weaknesses of our current electoral system. We invite comments on this as well as on the features of electoral systems which we feel merit further discussion and debate.

At this stage, the Assembly has not come to any conclusion about whether the present system needs to be reformed. In fact we have deliberately refrained from doing so. We are still busy learning about democratic electoral systems and want to hear from our fellow citizens about what they think. This is a time for discussion and debate and we invite all British Columbians to join us in this process.

### **The BC Citizens' Assembly on Electoral Reform**

The British Columbia Citizens' Assembly on Electoral Reform was established by the government and legislature in the spring of 2003 with a clear mandate. It is to "*assess models for electing Members of the Legislative Assembly*" and specifically the "*manner by which voters' ballots are translated into seats in the Legislative Assembly*." If the Assembly concludes that an alternate model to the one now used ought to be adopted, then its recommendation is to be put to a referendum of the province's voters on May 17, 2005, the time of the next scheduled provincial election. In making any recommendation, the Assembly is to ensure that any change would "*be consistent with both the Constitution of Canada and the Westminster parliamentary system*."

The Citizens' Assembly was established by an order-in-council which provided that its membership was open to all British Columbians on the provincial

voters list with the exception of working politicians. Jack Blaney was designated, by a unanimous vote of the Legislative Assembly, to chair the Assembly and direct the work of its staff. A two-stage random selection process – carefully balanced by gender and age and structured to include individuals from all electoral districts in the province – led to a further 160 citizens being randomly chosen from the provincial voters' list to constitute the Assembly's membership.

The Assembly constitutes a representative group of non-elected British Columbia citizens. Its members range in age from 19 to 78. They come from a diverse set of backgrounds, ethnic communities and occupations, but all are concerned with the health of the province's democracy and its common political life. The members have committed to working together over most of 2004 in a serious and sustained effort to evaluate the electoral system and determine if there is another system that might serve the province better.

The Assembly's work is divided into three phases.

**1** The first, now completed, involved detailed study of the range of electoral systems used in modern democracies. Given that no two countries use exactly the same system, this proved to be a major undertaking but it has given the Assembly an appreciation of the fact that there is no such thing as a perfect system. All electoral systems involve trade-offs among desirable elements, and any system must reflect the values and aspirations of the community that will use it. In a subsequent section of this statement, we report on our understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of the system now used in British Columbia.

**2** The second phase of the Assembly's work will involve listening carefully to the views of all British Columbians. What kind of politics would they like to see? What sorts of electoral systems do they believe are appropriate or desirable? Assembly members will participate in public hearings around the province and study formal submissions made to them (available on our website: [www.citizensassembly.bc.ca](http://www.citizensassembly.bc.ca)).

**3** In the third phase, scheduled for the fall of 2004, the Assembly will meet to hear formal presentations on the merits of alternate systems and then to discuss and debate the issues around its mandate so members can then draft a set of final recommendations for their fellow British Columbians. The mandate requires that the Assembly either endorse the current system or propose a specific alternative.




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This statement signals the end of the first phase and invites British Columbians to consider and respond to the preliminary assessment that Assembly members have made of the electoral system now in use and their suggestions for further consideration.

## **The Assembly's Work to Date**

The learning phase of the Assembly stretched over six busy weekends from January through March. Assembly members came together and worked hard to learn about the way our political system works, and then to study five different families of electoral systems. With presentations from staff members and visiting experts from across Canada and around the world, the Assembly learned how variations in constituency size, ballot-paper formats and counting formula combine to produce a wide variety of different systems.

### **The families studied include:**

- Majority systems (as in France or Australia)
- Plurality systems (as in Canada or India)
- Proportional representation by list systems (as in Finland or the Netherlands)
- Proportional representation by transferable vote systems (as in Ireland or Australia)
- Mixed systems (as in Germany or Japan)

The Assembly has taken the measure of these different kinds of systems and discovered that each has its advantages and disadvantages. (For details, please consult our website or contact the Assembly or its members for ‘fact sheets’ outlining these systems.) In accordance with its mandate, the Assembly has paid particular attention to the effects of these different electoral models *“on the government, the Legislative Assembly and the political parties.”* This intensive study has involved the mastery of complex concepts and the appreciation of relevant comparative experience through absorbing formal presentations, engaging in small group discussions, and undertaking considerable private study of advanced political science literature. All Assembly members have been active participants – attendance at Assembly meetings has been virtually 100% – and all members have participated fully and equally in the discussions that have led to this preliminary statement.

Assessing the comparative merits of differing systems is neither easy nor straightforward but Assembly members identified several criteria to use as benchmarks:

- The extent to which electoral outcomes reflected votes cast (the issue of vote-seat relationships)
- The nature of the linkage between voters and their representatives (the character of local representation)
- The range and nature of choice offered to voters (issues ranging from the number and nature of competing parties to the form of the ballots)
- The impact of the system on governance (the issues of effective government and the working of the legislature)

The Assembly quickly realized that there is no perfect system. The problem for it has been one of weighing the relative merits of the different systems and the trade-offs in desirable features that they require. At this stage in the work of the Assembly, members have reached a general consensus on the basic strengths and weaknesses of the present electoral system and believe that, before any decisions are taken, further reflection and debate is needed.

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**“The Assembly wants  
to hear from  
British Columbians”**

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## **The Citizens’ Assembly Assessment of the Current BC Electoral System**

Assembly members are cognizant that our current single-member plurality electoral system – sometimes known as First-Past-the-Post – has much to recommend it. The system has been in widespread use in British Columbia and most other parts of Canada for most of our history and has served us well. We have a flourishing democracy in which voters hold politicians and governments accountable and we would not want to abandon such a system unless it was clear that: 1) the system had deficiencies that detracted from the evolution and maintenance of healthy democratic politics in the province, and 2) we were convinced that there was an alternative system that could be adopted that would speak to the identified deficiencies.

In an attempt to advance discussion about our electoral system the Assembly has identified the following basic advantages and disadvantages of the system as it operates in British Columbia. This points to features that Assembly members believe need to be central to an assessment of the system.

### ***Strengths of the Current System:***

#### **Local Representation and Accountability**

The current system provides for individuals to be elected representing specific and identifiable areas of the province. This fosters a direct link between voters



and their representatives and ensures that all areas of the province have a spokesperson in the legislature. This system allows politicians to speak authoritatively for their area, enables issues of local concern to be placed on the public agenda, and provides a mechanism for voters to hold representatives directly accountable for their actions. All Members of the Legislative Assembly (MLAs) have equal standing in the legislature and share common obligations and relationships to the electorate.

### Style of Government and Representation

The current system promotes the creation of majority governments that can claim an electoral mandate. These governments have a security of tenure that allows them to plan confidently for the life of the Legislative Assembly and to implement their program as they see fit. By stimulating winner-take-all competition, the electoral system fosters two-party competition and works to limit the place and influence of minor parties and marginal interests. Elections generally revolve on the issue of the choice of governments.

### Simplicity, Familiarity & Transparent Counting

The single-member plurality system is familiar and straightforward. Voters are simply required to indicate their preferred candidate from the list of names presented. Winners are determined by a simple count of the ballots and are known almost immediately.

## Weaknesses of the Current System:

### Lack of Proportionality

Our single-member plurality system is one in which there is no direct connection between the number of votes a party receives and the number of seats it wins in the Legislative Assembly. The system favours large parties over small ones, creating governments with 'artificial' majorities and depriving minority views from finding expression in the legislature. This tends to limit effective voter choice, leads to many votes not contributing to electing any MLA, and sometimes leads to parties with the most votes not winning an election.

### Government-Dominated Parliaments

The system fosters an adversarial style of two-party politics in which government domination of the legislature becomes standard practice. With strong party discipline this ensures centralized decision-making with no effective opportunity for the legislature to hold the government accountable between elections. The system cannot ensure a strong opposition and, with MLAs required to put party interests above those of their constituencies, local and minority interests are often excluded.

### Impacts on Governance and Voters

Adversarial politics often result in sharp swings in public policy as newly elected governments often

## Glossary of Terms

**Adversarial system** – politics with a competitive struggle for power dominated by two rival parties leaving little room for compromise

**Coalition** – an alliance of two or more political parties working together to form government or to increase their influence in the Legislative Assembly

**Consensus system** – politics with power dispersed between more than two parties so that government policy requires compromise and the accommodation of a range of views before action can be taken

**Constituency** – riding or electoral district

**Constitution** – set of rules which describes the key institutions of government and specifies how they operate

**Electoral system** – set of rules for translating votes cast at an election into seats for a legislative assembly according to a specified electoral formula

**Legislative Assembly** – the parliament of British Columbia

**Legislature** – the law-making body of government; In BC, the legislature is the Legislative Assembly

**Majority (electoral) systems** – a family of electoral systems which require candidates to gain more than 50% of votes before they are

elected. The two most common majority systems are the *alternative vote* and the *second ballot*

**Mixed (electoral) systems** – electoral systems which combine two or more electoral formulas to choose candidates for a representative assembly

**MLA** – Member of the Legislative Assembly; the title of someone who is elected to the Legislative Assembly of British Columbia

**Opposition** – members of parliament who are not members of the governing party

**Order-in-council** – government document which appoints someone to an official office or authorizes a specific action

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undo or reverse the programs of their predecessors. This style of politics contributes to a growing alienation of voters from the political process which has been reflected in falling voter turnout rates, especially among young voters.

## Approaches to Alternative Electoral Systems

The Assembly has considered a wide range of alternative electoral systems and studied their impact in other democracies. It has given particular attention to the values that underlie the basic features of these other systems and their potential consequences for the style and character of British Columbia’s democracy. While it is difficult to predict in detail how any other specific system would work in British Columbia, the Assembly is convinced that any alternative system it

considers must reflect the values it believes are central to the political health of the province’s democracy. At this point it draws attention to important defining features of electoral systems:

### Local Representation

Our tradition has long valued a system of representation that provides for local representation – for its politicians to speak for and answer to the distinctive communities that make up the whole province. Citizens believe it is important that the interests of their particular communities be represented in public debate and policy-making. This is accomplished when MLAs have an intimate knowledge of the communities they represent and the concerns of the people in them.

With elected politicians rooted in specific

**Party discipline** – MLAs affiliated with a party are expected to follow the principles of the party and vote with party colleagues in the Legislative Assembly

**Party-list** – see Proportional Representation

**Plurality (electoral) systems** – a family of electoral systems in which candidates do not require a majority of votes to win seats; Examples are *single-member plurality system* (also called *first-past-the-post*) or *multi-member plurality systems*

**Proportional representation (PR)** – a family of electoral systems designed to ensure that the share of seats in the legislature won by a party reflects as closely as possible

the share of votes won by that party. Examples are PR by *list systems* (voters choose political parties) and PR by the *single transferable vote* (voters choose candidates)

**Referendum** – voters decide whether a proposal is accepted or rejected through a direct vote

**Single-member plurality (electoral) system** – see plurality systems

**Threshold** – the minimum proportion of the vote required to gain representation in the Legislative Assembly

**Westminster parliamentary system** – Canadian system where the most important elected offices of

government – such as the premier – are not elected directly but indirectly through parliamentary elections

**A full glossary of electoral terms, various fact sheets on electoral systems and other Citizens’ Assembly learning resources are available online.**

Visit *Learning Resources* on our website

[www.citizensassembly.bc.ca](http://www.citizensassembly.bc.ca)

geographic areas, it is possible for voters to hold them directly accountable for their performance in defending the values and interests of their local constituents.

Having a local representative gives individual citizens a direct personal channel into the government, a local contact they can use to obtain help or advance their concerns. The Assembly is aware that British Columbians in rural areas, and in locations far removed from the heavily populated Lower Mainland region, feel especially strongly that they must struggle to have their concerns heard. It is sensitive to the reality that for them, a vigorous system of local representation remains a highly valued dimension of their political life. It anticipates that any reformed electoral system would need to maintain an element of effective local representation.

Creating an electoral system that ensures effective local representation is an important challenge. The practice of party discipline obliges MLAs to vote as their party decides, not always as their voters prefer. The Assembly is interested in considering electoral systems whose features help ensure that elected representatives are more responsive to the concerns and views of their constituents.

### ***Proportionality***

The Assembly believes it is important that the outcome of an election, in terms of the distribution of seats in the Legislature, should reflect the expressed intentions of citizens as expressed in their votes. This is the principle of proportionality – seats won should be proportional to votes won.

Beyond an acceptance of this basic principle, the Assembly has learned that there are a number of important reasons why British Columbians might want to consider moving to an electoral system based on proportional representation. Such systems typically ensure that more parties are able to compete successfully and so provide voters with more choice. A direct consequence is that more interests and groups are able to have their voices heard in a Legislature that is more reflective of the social composition of the electorate.



Given the province's increasing diversity, this offers the possibility of more genuinely representative politics at a time when voter turnout is falling and apathy is rising among young British Columbians.

The Assembly is aware that proportional electoral systems are likely to end the dominance of one-party majority governments and lead to a more consensual, or at least coalitional, style of politics in which opposition and small-party MLAs have the opportunity to play a greater role in the government of the province. It believes that a move away from the highly charged adversarial politics that have characterized the province in recent decades might foster politics more in keeping with the values of contemporary British Columbians.

Most modern democracies incorporate some proportional element in their electoral systems. The Assembly is aware that by increasing the number of political parties such systems can alter the balance of forces in the legislature. To avoid excessive political fragmentation some consideration might have to be given to establishing a modest threshold that parties would be expected to meet before being guaranteed representation.

There are a number of possible proportional systems – some that exist in pure party-list form, others which combine with features of constituency-based systems in different ways. In terms of its basic value position the Assembly believes that many of these offer rich possibilities for British Columbia and deserve careful consideration. On the other hand, systems that are not responsive to the goal of increas-



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ing the proportionality of the system would seem to offer little in the way of advantage over the single-member plurality system we now use. In the same way, the choices offered voters are an important and integral part of any electoral system and the Assembly would not want to see it constrained.

### ***What kind of voting system do YOU want in British Columbia?***

The Assembly wants to hear from British Columbians. It wants to hear if they share its conviction that local representation needs to be an important element in the province's electoral system. It wants to hear if they agree with it that a more proportional system would better reflect the basic values of our province's population. It wants to hear what kind of choices they would like to see at the polls. And it is anxious to hear what kind of electoral system our fellow citizens believe can best express our common values.

We welcome feedback on these and any other aspect of the electoral system that British Columbians feel would contribute to our province's democratic process. We look forward to hearing a full expression of public views at our public hearings to be held across the province during May and June, and encourage formal submissions through our website or to the Assembly's office.

*Issued by the Citizens' Assembly on Electoral Reform  
At Morris J. Wosk Centre for Dialogue, March 21, 2004.*

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For a full account of the materials used in the learning phase, including a glossary, please consult our website:

**[www.citizensassembly.bc.ca](http://www.citizensassembly.bc.ca)**

#### **Website Contents:**

**The Assembly:** Frequently asked questions, Assembly members, history of Assembly, the process

**Learning Resources:** Readings, presentations, audio and video recordings, website links, resources for educators, glossary

**Get Involved:** Important dates, make or view a submission, apply to make a public hearing presentation

**News & Events:** Latest news, events calendar, newsletter

### ***Looking Ahead***

**Public hearings** – A total of 49 hearings are being held May 3 to June 24, 2004, throughout the province. Some members will be in attendance at each hearing to listen to the opinions of British Columbians.

**Review** – Members meet in Prince George, June 26-27, to discuss what they learned during the hearings and from the written submissions.

**Deliberation and decision** – September to November 2004. In a series of meetings in Vancouver, Citizens' Assembly members will choose and recommend an electoral system that they feel is best for the province. The Assembly could opt to stay with the current system or recommend a new one.

**Report of recommendation** – Due by December 15, 2004.

**Referendum** – If the Assembly recommends a new electoral system, it will be the subject of a referendum in the next provincial election on May 17, 2005.

### ***Get Involved***

**Public Hearings** – Make a presentation or join the discussion about British Columbia's electoral system. See the following page for details.

**Submissions** – Written submissions to the Assembly are being accepted from the public and are posted on our website. Visit our website or contact our office for details.

**Newsletter** – For the latest updates, subscribe online to the Assembly newsletter.

**Learn Online** – The Assembly website is full of learning resources about electoral systems including readings and presentation materials, website links, recommended study materials and audio and video recordings of Assembly learning sessions.

### ***Contact us***

[info@citizensassembly.bc.ca](mailto:info@citizensassembly.bc.ca)

Toll Free: 1-866-667-1232

Citizens' Assembly on Electoral Reform  
2288-555 W. Hastings Street  
PO Box 12118

## What kind of voting system do YOU want in BC?

The Assembly is holding 49 public hearings in communities around the province to hear British Columbians' views on BC's electoral system. It is also accepting written submissions. This is your chance to help shape our political and electoral system. We need you to get involved, to make your voice heard.

### Public Hearing Schedule

Location	Date	Times		Location	Date	Times
Vancouver 1	May 3, Mon	6:30 – 9:30 pm		Coquitlam	June 1, Tues	6:30 – 9:30 pm
Richmond	May 4, Tues	6:30 – 9:30 pm		North Vancouver	June 2, Wed	6:30 – 9:30 pm
Burnaby	May 5, Wed	6:30 – 9:30 pm		Whistler	June 3, Thurs	6:30 – 9:30 pm
New West	May 6, Thurs	6:30 – 9:30 pm		Abbotsford	June 5, Sat	1:30 – 4:30 pm
Surrey 1	May 8, Sat	1:30 – 4:30 pm		Sechelt	June 5, Sat	1:30 – 4:30 pm
Valemount	May 8, Sat	1:30 – 4:30 pm		Smithers	June 7, Mon	6:30 – 9:30 pm
Grand Forks	May 10, Mon	6:30 – 9:30 pm		Duncan	June 8, Tues	6:30 – 9:30 pm
Prince George	May 10, Mon	6:30 – 9:30 pm		Terrace	June 8, Tues	6:30 – 9:30 pm
Quesnel	May 11, Tues	6:30 – 9:30 pm		Port Alberni	June 9, Wed	6:30 – 9:30 pm
Fort Nelson	May 11, Tues	7:00 – 10:00 pm		Prince Rupert	June 9, Wed	6:30 – 9:30 pm
Nelson	May 11, Tues	6:30 – 9:30 pm		Victoria	June 10, Thurs	6:30 – 9:30 pm
Fort St John	May 12, Wed	7:00 – 10:00 pm		Queen Charlotte City	June 12, Sat	1:30 – 4:30 pm
Dawson Creek	May 13, Thurs	7:00 – 10:00 pm		Princeton	June 14, Mon	6:30 – 9:30 pm
Powell River	May 15, Sat	1:00 – 4:00 pm		Merritt	June 15, Tues	6:30 – 9:30 pm
Sidney/Victoria	May 15, Sat	1:30 – 4:30 pm		Lillooet	June 16, Wed	6:30 – 9:30 pm
Ucluelet	May 15, Sat	1:30 – 4:30 pm		Kamloops	June 17, Thurs	6:30 – 9:30 pm
Chilliwack	May 18, Tues	6:30 – 9:30 pm		Salt Spring	June 19, Sat	1:30 – 4:30 pm
Maple Ridge	May 19, Wed	6:30 – 9:30 pm		Williams Lake	June 19, Sat	1:30 – 4:30 pm
Langley	May 20, Thurs	6:30 – 9:30 pm		Vernon	June 21, Mon	6:30 – 9:30 pm
Port McNeill	May 25, Tues	6:00 – 9:00 pm		Cranbrook	June 21, Mon	6:30 – 9:30 pm
Courtenay/Comox	May 26, Wed	6:30 – 9:30 pm		Revelstoke	June 22, Tues	6:30 – 9:30 pm
Nanaimo	May 27, Thurs	6:30 – 9:30 pm		Radium/Invermere	June 22, Tues	6:30 – 9:30 pm
Vancouver 2	May 29, Sat	1:30 – 4:30 pm		Penticton	June 23, Wed	6:30 – 9:30 pm
Surrey 2	May 31, Mon	6:30 – 9:30 pm		Sparwood	June 23, Wed	6:30 – 9:30 pm
				Kelowna	June 24, Thurs	6:30 – 9:30 pm

NOTE: Please confirm hearing dates and times and obtain meeting locations by calling 1-866-667-1232 or checking [www.citizensassembly.bc.ca](http://www.citizensassembly.bc.ca).

**For More Information** on how to register to present your views at a public hearing or how to make a written submission to the Assembly:

Visit our website [www.citizensassembly.bc.ca](http://www.citizensassembly.bc.ca)

Email [hearings@citizensassembly.bc.ca](mailto:hearings@citizensassembly.bc.ca), or

Call 1-866-667-1232

Write Citizens' Assembly, 2288–555 W. Hastings Street, PO Box 12118, Vancouver, BC, V6B 4N6.