

PRESENTATION SUMMARY

SIDNEY/VICTORIA PUBLIC HEARING
DATED 15 MAY 2004
AT THE HOLIDAY INN VICTORIA

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.

Ben Dolf

Canadian Unitarian Council Study Group on International Affairs and Democracy

DESCRIPTION OF PRESENTATION

The Canadian Unitarian Council study group on democracy applauds the search for a more suitable electoral system. We also underline the need for a more formalized dialogue between citizens and their elected representatives. We present a simple model to that effect.

KEY THEMES

Mr. Dolf discussed the history of the Unitarians as a very old tradition of religious liberalism. The movement now embraces a rich pluralism of theist and atheist, agnostic and humanist beliefs. The presenter outlined the mandate of the Canadian Unitarian Council as aiming to raise awareness of the strengths and weaknesses of democracy. Mr. Dolf stated that the group found that: a disconnect exists between citizens and their representatives; there is a need for more democracy in every day life; and that there is a desire on the part of citizens to have more influence on the political agenda. The presenter argued that electoral change, while not necessarily remedying these problems, is a step in the right direction toward greater citizen engagement.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Mr. Dolf recommended that the Citizens' Assembly find ways of informing the citizenry about how democracy is practiced elsewhere in order to open the mind of the population to other possibilities. Further, Mr. Dolf supported the introduction of an assembly of citizens that would engage in a dialogue with representatives (possibly once a year), allowing citizens to set the agenda and choose the matters they wish to deliberate.

QUESTIONS, ANSWERS AND COMMENTS FROM THE PANEL

- Q How did your group arrive at your formal themes?
- A It was a going back and forth process between all Unitarians across the country. It was through a lot of discussion and dialogue. One of the striking problems is that people don't know what to say when you ask them about democracy. So I'm asking people to give us examples of democratic, and undemocratic processes, this will help us define democracy not in a dogmatic sense but as a

broad principle.

Q You stated that when you have an aggressive adversarial system that reflects us a people, this suggests that you favour a consensus style of government. In relation to that point, do you find that there is a trade-off between fast moving governments and compromise?

A Yes and no. It is amazing how people who are shaped by different systems approach controversy differently. I find that there is an entirely different culture on Swiss boards than there is here. In the Swiss system the leaders follow the will of the people, whereas here the people follow the leaders. This system is only more effective in the short-run.

QUESTIONS, ANSWERS AND COMMENTS FROM THE AUDIENCE

Q Are the concerns that your group has expressed being accounted for by the electoral reforms being considered here?

A No, they're not. But that is OK with me. A learning process is being engaged in here, and this will push us forward and force citizens to become involved.

Comment I think the Citizens' Assembly is a tremendous step forward for democracy in and of itself, and I think that your idea of having local assemblies in districts is also a great idea.