

# Women and Electoral Reform

Presented to the BC Citizens Assembly on Electoral Reform

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## Summary of Recommendations

The objective of this submission is to ensure that the members of the Citizens Assembly and the public are aware of the need to increase the number of elected women representatives and of concrete ways to achieve this goal. As such, we strongly urge the members of the Citizens Assembly to adopt, as a fundamental priority of democracy, the objective of increasing women's representation to numbers roughly equal to that of women's numbers in society at 51% and to do so by making the following reforms to BC's electoral system:

- Adopt elements of proportional representation into the voting system to correct for the current distortions generated by the majoritarian system as well as to enhance the participation of smaller political parties.
- Implement proactive measures (similar to that used for the Citizens Assembly on Electoral Reform) to increase women's representation to parity with our numbers in the population. We suggest measures that require that a minimum of 40% of each gender be elected as MLAs to the provincial legislature.
- Introduce campaign financing reforms, particularly with regards to nomination campaign spending limits.

## Submission Outline

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## **Women and Electoral Reform**

This submission focuses on women because women are consistently under-represented in electoral politics. Not only is this fundamentally undemocratic in a representative democracy, but moreover, this leads to the systematic exclusion of women's voices and concerns from political debates and public policy solutions. This paper will describe the current situation for women and the principal reason for our under-representation. It will look at the impact of women's under-representation as well as the benefits of increasing women's representation. It will then discuss the three main solutions that have been implemented in many countries around the world to increase the number of women elected: 1) the implementation of one of the proportional representation systems, 2) proactive measures that purposefully increase women's representation and/or guarantee a minimum percentage of representatives for each gender, and 3) campaign financial reforms. The paper will look at how these solutions could function in British Columbia (BC).

### **Women's Representation in the Electoral System**

In the history of the First Past the Post electoral system that we have in BC there has been a systemic under-representation of women, or put differently, an ongoing overrepresentation of men, among elected officials. In 1991, *The Royal Commission on Electoral Reform and Party Financing* released its extensive study on Canada's electoral system. The Commission found that women's under-representation was a significant problem and that women are the most under-represented segment of Canadian society.

Women make up roughly 51% of the Province's population, yet have never made up 51% of Members of the Legislative Assembly (MLAs), and there has only been one female Premier. Table 1 shows the number of women MLAs in BC from 1945 to 2001. The table indicates that the percentage of women among MLAs rose slowly from 4.2% in 1945 to 13% by 1986. In those forty two years, there were two long plateaus in which the percentage of women did not change, and there were two significant drops in women's representation down to about 2% in two separate terms. In 1991, the percentage of women almost doubled from the previous election to 25.3%. This number rose again to 28% in 1996 but declined to 24% in 2001. This may portend another plateau. One indicator of a lack of advance in women in politics is that the number of women candidates in the 2004 federal election is already too low to maintain the current percentage of women Members of Parliament. Women are making advances, but it's slow. It's taken 60 years for women to get almost halfway in terms of women's representation in the Legislature. Does it have to take another 60 years to achieve full representation?

**Table 1: Women Elected in B.C. General Elections: 1945-2001**

Year	C.C.F/ N.D.P	Social Credit	Liberal*	Other	Total	% Women MLAs
1945	0			2**	2	4.2
1949	0			2**	2	4.2
1952	1	1	1	0	3	6.2
1953	0	1	0	0	1	2.1
1956	1	1	0	0	2	3.8
1960	3	1	0	0	4	7.7
1963	1	0	0	0	1	1.9
1966	1	3	0	0	4	7.7
1969	1	4	0	0	5	9
1972	5	1	0	0	6	10.9
1975	4	2	0	0	6	10.9
1979	4	2	0	0	6	10.5
1983	4	2	0	0	6	10.5
1986	5	4	0	0	9	13
1991	16	0	3	0	19	25.3
1996	12	0	9	0	21	28
2001	2	0	17	0	19	24

\* The Liberal Party contested the 1945 and 1949 elections as part of the Coalition

\*\* Coalition Members

Source: Erickson 1997 and Elections B.C.

Across Canada, the picture is similar with women's representation among elected officials ranging from between 8 and 29% across the provinces and territories as shown in Table 2. (Following 2001, Quebec now has the highest percentage of women at 30.4%.) BC has had the distinction of leading the country in the percentage of women among MLAs. This changed in 2001 when BC's numbers dropped somewhat and Manitoba, Yukon and now Quebec moved ahead. Even with among the highest percentages of women in Canada, the numbers of women MLAs in BC are still well below the total percentage of women in our society, and they are below the critical mass level of 30% that is required to create significant shifts in policy based on women's interests (this will be described in more detail below).

**Table 2: Women in Canadian Legislatures: 1978-2001**

	1978		1998		2001	
	Number of Women	Percent	Number of Women	Percent	Number of Women	Percent
House of Commons	9	3.4	61	20.3	62	20
Alberta	2	2.6	22	26.5	17	20
<b>British Columbia</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>10.9</b>	<b>20</b>	<b>26.7</b>	<b>19</b>	<b>24</b>
Manitoba	1	1.8	11	19.3	14	25
New Brunswick	2	3.4	8	14.5	10	18
Newfoundland	1	1.9	8	16.7	8	17
Nova Scotia	1	2.2	6	11.5	4	8
Northwest Territories	0	0	2	8.3	2	10.5
Ontario	6	4.8	18	13.8	17	16
P.E.I.	2	6.3	4	14.8	6	22
Quebec	5	4.5	27	21.6	29	23
Saskatchewan	1	1.6	13	22.4	13	22
Yukon	3	25	3	17.6	5	29
<b>Total</b>	<b>45</b>	<b>4.2</b>	<b>231</b>	<b>20</b>	<b>146</b>	<b>20</b>

Source: Jeanette Ashe 2001; compiled from provincial election returns, and Canadian Parliamentary Review, 1998.

### **The Impacts of Women's Under-representation**

The result of women's under-representation is that policies that affect women or that are of particular concern to women such as a public childcare system, violence against women, national pensions, and affordable housing have not been adequately addressed or have not been addressed at all within political debates and policies. Jane Jenson has observed that the universe of political discourse "filters and delineates political activity of all kinds"<sup>1</sup>, which in the case of women marginalizes the collective identity of women and issues of concern to women. Further, the lack of will among political elites to share power equitably between women and men and an electoral system that is recognized as less apt to favour female candidacies appear to translate into a subtle but potent discouragement and alienation of female citizens<sup>2</sup>, fewer women wishing to run for political office, and widespread disillusionment among Canada's young women.

### **The Benefits of Increasing Women's Representation**

Numerous studies show a correlation between the presence of women in elected office and the degree to which women's issues are addressed in the political sphere. Tremblay has commented that "if the state has contributed to the definition of women's citizenship, women have likewise demanded that the state intervene on a diverse number of areas:

<sup>1</sup> Quoted in Peckford, Nancy, "A Mandate for Equality", [http://www.nawl.ca/brief-electoral-reform.htm#\\_1\\_3](http://www.nawl.ca/brief-electoral-reform.htm#_1_3), accessed 03/29/04.

<sup>2</sup> Steele, Jackie, "Synthesis Report on the Proceedings of the National Roundtable on Women and Politics 2003", *National Association of Women and the Law*, Ottawa, April 2003.

violence against women, child support payments, abortion, and reproductive technologies" (liberal translation).<sup>3</sup> Peckford documents that "legislative assemblies in Scandinavian countries have demonstrated that meaningful shifts in policy are not likely to occur until women are represented well above the 20 per cent mark. Though there is no consensus on a 'magic' number for women, the United Nations has identified 30 per cent as constituting critical mass for women's representation (Cheema 1999).<sup>4</sup>

Given the absence of women's representation and perspectives to provide for full and complete political debate and policy, our existing electoral system does not adequately serve women, and therefore cannot be understood as respecting the democratic will of fully half of the population. What can change this is the equal representation of women in elected politics. What then does it take to get more women elected?

Data reveals that a higher percentage of women are elected in proportional representation systems when coupled with proactive measures to increase women's representation, such as gender parity on party lists, or incentives that target a minimum percentage of each gender. In addition, financial limits are a concrete way of levelling the playing field to enable access to more candidates for elected office, including women. Underlying these electoral reforms, of course, is the will to increase women's representation in electoral politics so that gender equality becomes a reality *in practice*, rather than a theoretical political and legal principle on paper.

### Proportional Representation and Women

In a study of 24 democracies over the post-World War II period by International IDEA, data indicates a marked increase in women's representation in the 1970s – 1990s in systems with proportional representation. In contrast, as shown in Table 3 below, only modest gains arose in majoritarian systems such as our own First Past the Post system. There was only a slight increase in women's representation over the past decade in the Canadian House of Commons from 17.6% in 1993 to 20.6% in the 2000 elections. Whereas, countries with a proportional representation system usually in combination with incentives have on average double the number of elected women representatives.

**Table 3: Percent of Women MPs across 24 National Legislatures from 1945-1998**

Majoritarian vs. Proportional Representation Systems							
System	1945	1950	1960	1970	1980	1990	1998
<b>SMD</b>	3.05	2.13	2.51	2.23	3.37	8.16	11.64
<b>MMD</b>	2.93	4.73	5.47	5.86	11.89	18.13	23.03
<b>SMD:</b> Majoritarian or single-member district (SMD) systems are used in:				<b>MMD:</b> Proportional representation or multi-member district (MMD) systems are			

<sup>3</sup> Tremblay, Manon, *Des femmes au Parlement: Une stratégie féministe?*, les éditions remue-ménage, Montréal, 1999, p. 42.

<sup>4</sup> Peckford, Nancy, "A Mandate for Equality", [http://www.nawl.ca/brief-electoral-reform.htm#\\_1\\_3](http://www.nawl.ca/brief-electoral-reform.htm#_1_3), accessed 03/29/04. See also, Bystydzienski, Jill, *Women in Electoral Politics: Lessons from Norway*, Westport, London, 1995.

Australia, Canada, France (1960~), Japan, New Zealand (1945-1990), United Kingdom and the United States.	used in: Austria, Belgium, Denmark, Finland, France (1945 & 1950), Greece*, Iceland Ireland, Israel**, Italy, Luxembourg, Netherlands, New Zealand (1998), Norway, Portugal*, Spain*, Sweden, Switzerland and Germany (West Germany** prior to 1990).
<p>* Greece, Portugal and Spain became democratic in the 1970s and are therefore only included in the 1980, 1990 and 1998 calculations.</p> <p>** Israel did not exist and West Germany did not hold elections in 1945. They are therefore not included in the 1945 numbers. They are included for all years following 1945.</p>	

Source: Data compiled by International IDEA and presented by Jackie Steele, 2003.<sup>5</sup>

### Proactive Measures to Increase Women's Representation

While an electoral system based on proportional representation better reflects voters' choices and allows access to those who have typically faced systemic barriers to getting elected, there is an additional barrier that exists for women that it does not directly address, and that is women's access to party nominations.<sup>6</sup> Steele and Peckford state that "not only are women and other marginalized groups excluded in the recruitment processes, those who manage to gain access to the system have to be significantly more qualified to earn the confidence of the party gatekeepers".<sup>7</sup>

In BC, there is a declining trend in the number of women either or both seeking the party nomination and winning it. Table 6 shows that the number of women candidates jumped in 1991 to 26.5% of all candidates up from 19% in 1986. This jump is reflected the number of women who were elected that year. Since 1991, the percentage of women candidates has been sliding back somewhat.

**Table 6: Percentage of Women Candidates in B.C. General Elections: 1972-2001**

Election Year	N.D.P	Social Credit	Liberal	Reform	Other*	% Women Candidates
1972	14.5	7.2	9.4		15.9	11.9
1975	18.2	3.6	16.3		11.3	12.2
1979	21.1	5.3	0		18.6	14.6
1983	22.8	8.8	19.2		5.2	13.8
1986	30.4	7.2	23.6		11.4	19
1991	33.3	24.3	21.1		26.8	26.5
1996	29	16	31	13	28	25

<sup>5</sup> Steele, Jackie, and Nancy Peckford, "Information Sheet 2.0: Effects of Electoral Systems on Women's Representation", *National Association of Women and the Law*, March 2003.

<sup>6</sup> See Black, Jerome, and Lynda Erickson, "Similarity, Compensation, or Difference? A Comparison of Female and Male Office-Seekers", *Women and Politics*, 21:4, 2000; Black, Jerome, "Ethnoracial Minorities in the Canadian House of Commons: The Case of the 36<sup>th</sup> Parliament", *Canadian Ethnic Studies*, 32: 2, 2000.

<sup>7</sup> Steele, Jackie, and Nancy Peckford, "Information Sheet 3.0: Electoral Systems and Their Public Policy Outcomes", *National Association of Women and the Law*, March 2003.

\*includes independents

Source: Erickson 1997 and B.C. Election Returns.

Implementing proactive measures in combination with a proportional representation system can help the number of women elected rise even higher. An example of a proactive measure that would be familiar to us in BC is the provincial Citizen's Assembly selection process. One woman was randomly selected from a list of registered women voters and one man was selected from a list of registered men for each constituency.

Table 4 below provides a comparison of some of the countries with a proportional representation system that have implemented a proactive measure to increase the number of women elected versus countries with a proportional representation system that have not implemented any incentives. It shows that in countries without any incentive, women's representation is at on average 21.1% as in Canada, and in countries with incentives, women's representation is at on average 33.2%.



**Table 4: Percent of Women in the National Legislatures of Countries Using Proactive Measures for Women Versus Countries Without Incentives**

<b>Countries with Incentives</b>	<b>Nature of the Incentive</b>	<b>Election Date</b>	<b>% of Women</b>	<b>Countries without Incentives</b>	<b>Election Date</b>	<b>% of Women</b>
<b>Argentina</b>	Legislated Quota: 40%-60% both sexes	2001	30.7%	<b>Belgium</b>	1999	23.3%
<b>Austria</b>	Party Quota: Greens began in 1993: 50% (zipper system)	2002	31.1%	<b>Germany</b>	2002	32.2%
<b>Costa Rica</b>	Legislated Quota: 40% women	2001	35%	<b>Greece</b>	2000	8.7%
<b>Denmark</b>	Party Quota: 40% women (Soc.-Dem. Party began in 1988 for local and regional elections)	2001	38%	<b>Iceland</b>	1999	34.9%
<b>Finland</b>	Legislated Quota: 40% women (for all relevant bodies)	1999	36.5%	<b>Ireland</b>	2002	13.3%
<b>France</b>	Legislated Quota 50% (zipper system) (not in all districts)	2002	12.1%	<b>Israel</b>	1999	14.2%
<b>Mozambique</b>	Party Quota 30% women (Frelimo Party began in 1999)	1999	30%	<b>Italy</b>	2001	9.8%
<b>Namibia</b>	Legislated Quota 30% women (Started in 1992 in local elections)	1999	25%	<b>New Zealand</b>	2002	29.2%
<b>Norway</b>	Party Quota 40% women (Labour Party began in 1983)	2001	36.4%	<b>Portugal</b>	2002	29.2%
<b>South Africa</b>	Legislated Quota 50% women (for local elections)	1999	29.8%	<b>Spain</b>	2000	24.3%
<b>Sweden</b>	Party Quota 50% women (zipper system) (Soc.-Dem. Party began in 1994)			<b>Switzerland</b>	1999	23%
<b>Average Percent of Women</b>			<b>33.2%</b>	<b>Average Percent of Women</b>		<b>21.1%</b>

Source: Compiled by Jackie Steele using data from the websites of the Inter-Parliamentary Union and International IDEA.<sup>8</sup>

Because proportional representation alone has not been sufficient for women to reach parity in elected office, there are many countries that use proactive measures to increase women's representation. As shown in Table 5, the countries that rank among the top ten in terms of women's representation all use proactive incentives and all but Cuba use them in combination with a form of proportional representation. Women's representation in

<sup>8</sup> Steele, Jackie, and Nancy Peckford, "Information Sheet 2.0: Effects of Electoral Systems on Women's Representation", *National Association of Women and the Law*, March 2003.

these ten countries ranges between 35.3% and 48.8%. This compares to 21% in Canada and 24% in BC.

**Table 5: Top 8 Countries by Women’s Representation in Parliament in 2002**

Rank	Country	National Assemblies, Houses of Common, or Unique or Lower Houses in 2002				
		Electoral System	Proactive measures	Total seats	Number of women elected	% of women elected
1	Rwanda	Pro rep	Yes	80	39	48.8
2	Sweden	Pro rep	Yes	349	158	45.3
3	Denmark	Pro rep	Yes	179	68	38.0
4	Finland	Pro rep	Yes	200	75	37.5
5	Netherlands	Pro rep	Yes	150	55	36.7
6	Norway	Pro rep	Yes	165	60	36.4
7	Cuba	Majority	No	609	219	36.0
8	Spain	Pro rep	Yes	350	126	36.0
9	Costa Rica	Pro rep	Yes	57	20	35.3
10	Belgium	Pro rep	Yes	150	53	35.3

Source: Memoire presented to the Commission des institutions by the Federation des femmes du Quebec, November 2002.

### **Proactive Measures Applied in BC**

There are a number of mechanisms that are used to increase women’s representation among elected officials including using two ballots and “zippering” closed party lists.

#### ***Two Ballots***

In a First Past the Post electoral system, rather than receiving one ballot, a voter would receive two with one listing all the female candidates and the other listing of the male candidates. The voter would select one male candidate on one ballot and the female candidates on the other ballot. As mentioned, this is similar to the proactive measure that the provincial government used to select members for the Citizens Assembly.

In the case of a Single Transferable Vote electoral system, the voter would rank the male candidates on one ballot and the female candidates on the other ballot.

#### ***Closed party lists with proactive measures (zippering)***

In a Party List system, each party submits a ranked list of candidates. To ensure women representatives are elected, a proactive measure would require that the party list alternate between female and male candidates (ie, woman, man, woman, man, etc.). This is called “zippering”.

In the case of a Mixed Member Proportional (MMP) system, there are several ways of combining proactive measures to increase women’s representation among elected officials. One way is implement a two ballot system for geographic seats (elected under

First Past the Post) and zippering of closed party lists. If only one person is elected per geographic constituency, then the electoral system could be structured so that the party lists are required to list candidates from groups including women who are not adequately represented among the MLAs with geographic seats.

### **Financial Reform**

In addition to proportional representation systems and proactive measures to address the imbalance between men and women among elected officials, financial reforms are a necessary tool for removing the systemic barriers to women in getting the party nomination. Financial reforms promote democracy as a sphere where ideas, not money, are the common currency guiding the governance of our Province.

*The Royal Commission on Electoral Reform and Party Financing* released in 1991 recommended the following measures:

- Spending limits on nomination campaigns
- Permitting nomination donations to count as tax credits
- Making child care expenses an allowable tax deduction (or, we would add, rebates)
- Reimbursing parties who run more women (eg., % return of total expenses based on the total % of women elected up to 50%)

### **Conclusion & Recommendations**

In summary, women are the most under-represented group in Canadian electoral politics and this impoverishes political debates and decisions and highlights a “democratic deficit” in our electoral system for fully half of the population. The First Past the Post electoral system that we have currently in BC is a barrier to women’s representation (and other marginalized groups) by virtue of the fact that it tends to encourage political parties to seek out candidates who fit the “white, male norm”. Without specific proactive measures to increase the representation of women, no electoral system can by itself guarantee the equal representation of women in government, but there is a category of electoral systems that is more favourable to women and under-represented minorities, and that is proportional representation. In addition, proactive measures can be used to increase women’s representation and begin to allow women to reach parity. Lastly, financial reforms for campaigns are necessary to reduce barriers to women’s access to the party nomination. These recommendations come from strategies adopted by countries that have been successful in increasing the number of women elected in their countries.

The objective of this submission is to ensure that the members of the Citizens Assembly and the public are aware of the need to increase the number of elected women representatives and of concrete ways to achieve this goal. As such, we strongly urge the members of the Citizens Assembly to adopt, as a fundamental priority of democracy, the objective of increasing women’s representation to numbers roughly equal to that of women’s numbers in society at 51% and to do so by making the following reforms to BC’s electoral system:

- Adopt elements of proportional representation into the voting system to correct for the current distortions generated by the majoritarian system as well as to enhance the participation of smaller political parties.
- Implement proactive measures (similar to that used for the Citizens Assembly on Electoral Reform) to increase women's representation to parity with our numbers in the population. We suggest measures that require that a minimum of 40% of each gender be elected as MLAs to the provincial legislature.
- Introduce campaign financing reforms, particularly with regards to nomination campaign spending limits.

With these reforms to BC's electoral system, we can begin to imagine a time when our MLAs reflect the diversity of our citizens and where there are multiple political voices adding rigour and richness to political debates and decisions. The opportunity to imagine a truly democratic society is upon us, and there is no better time to strengthen the democratic values and principles that we hold dear as a Province than now.