

BC Citizens Assembly on Electoral Reform

Honorable Members:

Let me begin by congratulating each of you for being part of this Assembly and thanking you for taking the time to do it. I welcome your efforts, even without knowing the final shape of your deliberations, because they represent a very important step for Canadians to take. What you are doing is something truly significant in Canadian history. Lacking a revolutionary heritage, our citizens have not debated or considered some of the questions that lie before you. You--and through your efforts, we--are beginning the process of defining how we wish to govern ourselves. It is important to note that you are here as citizens, not as governments or representatives of groups. Your work will prove to be very important, I believe.

I have tried to organize my thoughts about voting reform around principles that flow from how I define democracy. I hope you will not find them too simplistic, for I believe they are worth supporting. My list contains four principles:

- *First, that everybody has the right to vote, save for those people whose voting right has been removed.*

In itself, this is not unusual. It is a key element of the following principle.

- *Second, that all votes should enjoy the same weight; one vote should be worth the same as another.*

Unfortunately, our system ignores this principle, though I suspect it is one that most of us endorse. My favorite example is at the Federal level, where some 14,000 people in Prince Edward Island are entitled to one MP, while it takes some 125,000 people on Vancouver's North Shore to elect an MP. Similar problems exist within BC's electoral map. We point to history as explaining these anomalies; indeed, we have all manner of weasel words to cover up this undemocratic discrepancy. But the simple answer should be: in a democracy, one vote should be the same as another.

- *Third, that decisions are made on the basis of the rule of the majority, defined as 50% of the votes cast plus one.*

Although most of us would defend Canada as a democracy, the truth is that we ignore this principle. The majority doesn't rule, the 'plurality' does. Only within Parliament does the majority rule; elsewhere, plurality rules and has distorted the simple idea that decisions are made by the majority of people voting. Without gathering at least 50% of support, MLAs (and MPs) are surely not representative of their area. Pluralities just don't cut it.

- *Fourth, politicians should represent real people and their district, not political parties.*

I strongly support representation of physical areas as the basis for our decision-making. Our present riding system, I think, should form the basis of our future system. Without this, we cannot hold individuals to account for their actions. Accountability exists within physical boundaries, but does not within a party

I am familiar with the arguments supporting Proportional Representation, and I am not unsympathetic to them, so long as they do not transgress the principles identified above. I understand that the desire for Proportional Representation springs from frustration with our present voting system. But I sincerely believe that the root causes of this anger lie more with the inequities of our Parliamentary model and the unchecked powers of the first minister, rather than our voting system. Accordingly, I do not support Proportional Representation as the sole mechanism we might use to select our representatives. I believe consideration should be given to allocating some additional seats to be decided by general voting trends province-wide. I don't have a precise formula to offer, but I suspect that it should be around 10% of the seats, no more.

There is a problem I see with our present system that I fear Proportional Representation would exacerbate. I am concerned with the role and influence accorded political parties. I have been around a few of them. Parties are undemocratic, controlled easily by interest groups, without principles and reflect some of the worst values of our society. They are gangs of a specialized kind of street warfare. I wish we could do without them. We can't, but maybe we can reduce their influence. Proportional Representation will place even more power in the hands of the party elite, through their control of the electoral lists prepared for Proportional Representation. I see this as a major problem; hence my suggestion to limit the seats accorded to Proportional Representation to no more than around 10% of the total.

In closing, please accept my best wishes for your work. I hope you will enjoy this process and press your own opinions vigorously. Democracy works best through active participation and I think you should all press your views hard. We'll all benefit from it. Thank you for being a part of this procedure and for hearing my views.