

A Proposition to the Citizens' Assembly on Electoral Reform

June 20, 2004

Please consider the following submission detailing a mixed riding-proportionate representation system for use in BC.

In summary:

- Party politics dominate, often making individual MLAs irrelevant
- Voters feel disenfranchised when 60+% of the ballots cast are thrown away as being part of the 'losers' in the election.

Recommendations:

- 50 seats allocated as 'first-past-the-post' ridings.
- Include a 'None of the Above' option in the ridings.
- 29 seats allocated proportionately by a second, party-only ballot, with a 5% minimum of the votes cast to be included in the seat allocation process.

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Introduction:

Our current electoral system has both strengths and weaknesses. By combining the legislative and executive functions of the British Parliamentary system into a single unit, we are sure to get things done. Taken to the extreme, this strength can also be a weakness – rampant power rolling over any opposition, like a boulder going downhill. The only way to combat this is to have an effective legislature, which requires an effective opposition as well as a dedicated government.

From the voter's point of view, party politics and control in the legislature make for a government and representatives that are distanced from the electorate. It appears, again from the voter's point of view, that the entire government is controlled by a small group of people, or perhaps just one person. It would not surprise me if some people feel we should just go ahead and elect a dictator for a four-year period – there would be no effective difference.

Whatever change is brought to the system, it must be designed to carry on the virtues of what we have, and supplement these with a process that eliminates, or at least minimizes, the vices.

The Virtues:

Having a riding system means that voters know who is their MLA. There is a connection available to the voters when needed. The lack of a local MLA, someone from your own community, is a real detriment to any purely proportionate electoral system.

A party system allows interested people with common views and values to work actively to form a government, to present these views to the public, and to put them into practice.

The Vices:

Party control exists too tightly within the Legislature. It appears to the public that MLAs are not permitted to voice their constituent's concerns if they happen to differ from current government policy. In addition, good ideas, if brought forward by private members of the opposition party, are never implemented.

With the 'First Past The Post' system, it becomes possible for a single party to completely dominate the legislature – the votes for other parties may as well have been thrown away. People voting for other political parties end up feeling disenfranchised.

Campaigns are run based on party lines, with little emphasis on the candidates running in the riding. Voters will often vote for the party regardless of the candidate representing a particular party. For example, discussions with my co-workers during the federal election campaign were completely dominated by the policies of the party and the stature and views of the party leaders. The fact that there are individuals – real people – with their own viewpoints running in the riding was effectively ignored.

The Solution:

Have a riding system with the bonus of having one's vote count for something. Take some of the party politics out of the candidate selection process – thus making the local candidates themselves more meaningful.

My suggestion is the following. Break the province up into 50 ridings, equally divided according to population and similar measures. (The method need not be too different from what is being done today with 79 ridings.) These seats would be selected in the same fashion as is being done now. This guarantees each citizen will have a local MLA to represent them.

The remaining 29 seats would then be based on a proportion of the ballots cast in the election. To make this meaningful, and to remove much of the party connection in the voter's selections for the local riding candidates, give each voter a second ballot to select a political party. These would be tallied on a province-wide basis, and then the seats distributed proportionately. Include a minimum 5% of all ballots cast before including fringe party ballots in the proportional distribution process. Prior to the election, each party must submit a list to the Chief Electoral Officer and to the public of 29 people, ranked from 1 to 29. These people may not be running in any riding during the current election. The MLAs chosen from these lists are chosen from the top down. If, for example, the Liberals were allocated 10 seats, the first 10 on the Liberal list would be selected.

As a final twist, the electorate must be given the option to reject the entire slate of candidates in their riding. The candidate selection process is typically done by less than 3% of the eligible voters in any riding – there is no guarantee that these selections are palatable to the electorate at large. So, on the ballot for the riding, include a last option, 'None of the above'. If the 'None of the above' option 'wins' in the riding, a by-election must be called within 45 days, with the stipulation that none of the candidates that ran in the election are eligible to run in the by-election.

The net result would be a more balanced legislature, with the MLAs representing ridings being more responsible to their ridings due to the weakening of the party connection. The electorate would additionally feel more connected to their local MLAs, and would also feel that their votes truly counted for something – every vote cast would count towards an MLA (at large) in the Legislature.

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Recommendations:

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Conclusion:

I would appreciate due consideration being given this proposal. While it is a mix of two systems, I believe that it uses the advantages of both while minimizing their weaknesses. While no system is perfect, I believe that a system such as this one comes closer than many others. Germany, for example, has a similar mixed system – though I believe the split is 50-50 between ridings and proportional representation seats.

Thank you for your time.

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