

**Submission to  
The Citizens' Assembly on Electoral Reform  
Presented by George Heyman, President  
BC Government and Service Employees' Union (BCGEU)  
June 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2004**

**Introduction**

I'm pleased to present this submission on behalf of the BCGEU. Our union represents over 60,000 women and men in a range of occupations which include home support workers, trades instructors, field biologists, childcare workers, health and social service workers, payroll clerks, hospitality and tourism workers – people who work directly for government in the broader public sector and the private sector.

BCGEU members are active in their communities and in their union, and they're concerned about the state of our democracy.

**BCGEU policy**

At last October's BCGEU Policy Convention, our delegates had a debate about what is causing voter apathy and cynicism, and how to reverse it. Those who spoke said they were troubled by low voter turnout, and particularly youth alienation from the political process.

The resolution they passed called on the BCGEU:

- To encourage public dialogue about the creation of new democratic institutions;
- To promote institutions that involve a more diverse group of citizens to build consensus on important public policies;

- To encourage electoral reform that includes proportional representation.

Union activists who spoke at that Convention raised many of the same issues that appear in the Preliminary Statement released by the Citizens' Assembly in March.

That statement said:

*"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.....Give the province's increasing diversity, thus (proportionality) 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 BCGEU agrees that electoral reform that incorporates proportional representation could be a key to winning back voters' confidence and participation.

There are many different proportional systems in use in democracies across the world; but as the Assembly points out

*"Every democratic system involves trade-offs among desirable elements and any system must reflect the values and aspirations of the community that will use it."*

There are many features of our current system which should be maintained as we make a transition to a more responsible system. The following issues are ones that we encourage the Citizens' Assembly to consider during their deliberations over the coming months.

### ***1. Eliminate unbalanced, unearned majorities***

The current system promotes the creation of unbalanced, unearned majority governments that then transform their election into a mandate to implement anything they like – programs they didn't include in their campaign, like corporate tax breaks; programs they campaigned against; even initiatives they specifically promised they would not implement if elected – like tearing up collective agreements, privatizing liquor stores, selling off BC Rail.

This behaviour in government is not limited to our province – the system itself seems to contribute to this arrogance in office, which in turn erodes public confidence and interest in electoral politics.

### ***2. Strengthen local accountability***

The strong link between voters in a geographical area and their representative should be maintained. This is particularly important in rural areas. Unfortunately, this accountability seems also to be undermined by the unearned majorities of “first past the post” systems. The experience of BCGEU members in many communities is that MLAs refuse to meet with any constituents they suspect will criticize government policies; MLAs decline invitations, refuse to set constituency hours, or lock constituency office doors to limit contact.

Only a government secure in an immense majority can allow MLAs to neglect constituency responsibilities in this way. Any electoral reforms that reduce the likelihood of disproportionate electoral landslides can only strengthen local accountability.

### *3. Keep the balloting process simple and clear*

In reforming the electoral system we should avoid making the ballot or the process too complicated. One admirable feature of the current system is the simplicity of the ballot, the clarity of the election and the speed of the election result itself. The balloting is easy to conduct, to count and to scrutineer. Ambiguities are limited, and easily resolved, and the winners are known almost immediately. Extra efforts need to be made to maintain the voters' list either by restoring to periodic enumeration or by using existing government databases.

### *4. Respect for diverse interests*

Some commentators have expressed concern that minority views are not integrated into the current electoral system. From the BCGEU perspective it seems that minority views often dominate the BC legislature under the present system, at the expense of a broader range of views held by the majority of citizens, that could well be reconciled through more consensual governance. Electoral reform should provide space for the diverse interests in British Columbia. We need a system that promotes compromise between competing needs where possible, and is balanced towards social inclusion and public responsibility.

At present the views, realities and needs of the majority of British Columbians are smothered by one set of interests represented by the current overwhelming legislative majority, and of course to some degree the potential for such imbalance to some degree is inherent in our current system.

### *5. Promote diversity in representation*

We believe electoral reform should include measures to ensure increased representation for women, aboriginal people, people of colour and equity seeking groups. As a province we can be proud of having elected the first Indo-Canadian premier, but it is true that despite informal and formal measures taken by various political parties, representation of equity seeking groups does not reflect their numbers in the general population. Women in particular are consistently under-represented in the Legislature.

### *6. Is there a system that will work in BC?*

We believe the best system for BC would be a mixed system that maintains simple local constituency representation and also ensures the Legislature makeup much more closely reflects the popular vote. Variants of these systems are in use in Germany, Scotland and New Zealand, where systems essentially split the legislature into two types of representatives, those representing constituency and those from a party list.

It will be important to ensure that establishment of party lists is transparent and that the list system helps achieve diversity and regional balance in the Legislature. Rules for establishment of party lists should be clearly set out through legislation.

We find it disappointing and counter-productive that the government has prohibited the Citizens' Assembly from making any recommendation that increases the number of seats in the House. Some kind of increase is almost inevitable in order to achieve genuine electoral reform, and this restriction unnecessarily hampers the Assembly's work in considering options to ensure that the Legislature is more reflective of voters' expressed intentions.

### *7. Change need not mean instability*

Any shift to include proportional representation should include establishing thresholds for parliamentary seats – either a percentage of the popular vote, or a requirement to field candidates in a percentage of ridings, or both. This will bring a degree of parliamentary stability and discourage disruptive or politically extremist parties.

It's true that proportional representation systems tend to generate coalition or minority governments, but within the Canadian context these have often produced governance more in tune with the wishes of the greatest number.

Minority governments in Canada have produced some of the most important social benefits and programs for working people---The Pearson minority of 1963-65 secured the Canada Pension Plan, universal medicare , and student loans. Under that government, Canada refused to join the Vietnam War.

It seems that at the national level at least, any instability for minority governments is directly related to their inability or unwillingness to work with other parties in the legislature. Joe Clark's brief 6 month term (1979) is an example.

At the provincial level, recent minority governments have also been good governments for working people. The Liberal minority of David Peterson in the eighties relied on an agenda worked out with the NDP. Among other benefits it brought in far-reaching pay equity legislation covering the public and the private sector. That law alone put millions of dollars in the pockets of women whose work had historically been undervalued and underpaid.

More recently, in Nova Scotia, John Hamm's Conservative minority government passed its budget with the support of the NDP, but only after it stood down tax cuts which would

have resulted in cutbacks to social programs and promised to stop charging seniors in nursing homes for their medical care.

### ***8. Don't expect too much from electoral reform***

Many people have raised concerns about the adversarial nature of BC politics and blame party politics and party discipline. Looking to electoral reform to overcome this may result in disappointment.

Setting aside the problematic culture of the BC Legislature, it is a reality that there are competing interests and needs in our society and this competition is reflected in our democratic institutions. Electoral reform can only create a system that encourages compromise, where this is possible. Party politics and party discipline at least establish expectations between electors and the elected. While not perfect, this helps establish accountability, which we believe would be greatly strengthened by a mixed proportional representation system.

### **Conclusion**

The results of electoral reform are unpredictable. The experience of other countries suggests that it will take patience and a large investment in public education to make sure we get a system that works for BC. In addition to a public information campaign on the changes in balloting procedures and how the vote will work, extra efforts should be made to reach young people. At the high school level information on the changes should be included in school curriculum so that when students reach voting age, they are clear what they are expected to do, to participate in our democracy and in the voting booth. Efforts will have to be made to reach and educate the group aged 19 to 30, since

their participation rates are low. The Citizens' Assembly has been quite successful at informing the public about its work to date, and similar and greater effort needs to accompany any changes in the structure of representation and balloting.

The BCGEU believes that if we have the courage to make fundamental changes in our electoral system we can reduce apathy, increase democratic participation, and increase the likelihood that our government will reflect the needs of the majority of citizens. This can only strengthen our democracy and society.

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