

Submission to the Citizens' Assembly
(personal)

by

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Ladies and Gentlemen:

I want to add my voice to others and urge you NOT to abandon the “first-past-the-post” system we have now in the province.

I have spent most of my career as a newspaper and then as a television reporter, often reporting political stories. I have worked in the press gallery in Victoria, and, briefly, in Ottawa. I know politicians and the political system – it’s strengths and its weaknesses. I’ve also spent time studying the British parliament.

Why do I favour first-past-the-post? There are many reasons I will list, but the most important is a philosophical one.

Government, I believe, exists primarily to enable people to live together peacefully and productively. When conflicts arise, which often happens, we need ways to sort out our differences. By conflict I don’t necessarily mean violence – but disputes can escalate into violence unless we have agreed upon ways of living together.

One way we resolve our differences is by accepting the role of judges and the courts. Another is by electing people, and accepting the legitimacy of the decisions they make.

To be considered legitimate by the broad majority, governments must develop a relatively broad appeal. Most of the electorate must be convinced that, even when they disagree with a government’s policy, it has the legitimate right to impose it.

In our current first-past-the-post system, a political party needs to develop and advocate policies that many will accept in order to gain election. Parties with narrow interests do not gain seats in the Legislature.

Hence, “mainline” political parties spend considerable time working out policy that will appeal to the as many people as possible, consistent with their general ideological principles (e.g., “free enterprise,” “care of the less fortunate,” “preservation of the environment,” etc.) This means that *within* the mainline parties compromises have to be worked out.

Interest groups may try to influence a mainline party’s stance, but the party must consider their requests in light of many others. An interest group generally does not get everything it wants. (E.g., business groups do not get “right to work” legislation from the BC Liberals; unions do not get the certification or bargaining rights that they wish from the NDP; environmental groups do not get all the parks they want established from either party’s government; etc.)

Once a party is elected to Opposition, further refinement of policy takes place to gain broad support. When and if they become government, the party should govern with policies that are acceptable to a large number of the population. (Its opposition will claim that it isn’t, but then that’s the role of opposition.)

The whole point is to establish a government that is considered legitimate by most, and their decisions honoured – even by those who differ with the government.

The desire to be re-elected keeps the government on a path acceptable to most voters. Of course if the government fails to maintain generally accepted policies, they are punished at the next election. (E.g., the federal Conservatives in 1993, the provincial NDP in 2001.)

In a system of proportional representation, there is a much lower bar for entry into the Legislature. Minority government is almost guaranteed. While election is not guaranteed, it is much more likely that third, fourth, even fifth or sixth place parties will gain seats. This means that parties can be smaller, and does away with the requirement that they appeal to a broad segment of the electorate. These small parties turn out more like “interest groups” than the omnibus mainland parties that currently dominate our political landscape.

The requirement that that parties develop and hone policy before election – and before assumption of power - is greatly reduced. With some success almost guaranteed, a party can focus on a relatively narrow segment of policy that appeals to relatively few voters. For instance, they can be concerned about the environment without paying a great deal of attention to the economic effects of environment regulation; interested in reducing taxes without concerning themselves about the reduction of programs for the poor; opposed to aboriginal concerns without worrying about the backlash; and so forth.

For government to have legitimacy, most people have to be convinced that decisions have been made legitimately. Compromises still have to be made for leaders to govern. However, rather than developing policy through political parties, policy is pieced together in the Legislature, after the election, when the Government is formed. Trading back-and-forth, compromises, and all that happens in our current system within the parties and caucus.

In my opinion, this process of creating policy *after* the election is much less satisfactory than the process we have now. Minority parties, representing fairly narrow interests, can claim disproportionate power. The process is rushed and not well thought out. It does not result in stable governments – or governments not as stable as we have now.

In short, our first-past-the-post system promotes the creation of broad-based parties that must do much of the hard work of preparation for governing before the assumption of power. A proportional representation system leaves all this till after the election when it is done hastily and on an ad hoc basis.

Other reasons for favouring first-past-the-post:

1. It is easy to understand, which contributes to legitimacy.

2. It promotes use of the local MLA as a helper-ombudsman, a very important function. (Most MLAs do not get to participate in the Government.)

3. It leads to stable, majority government (unless the electorate is seriously divided).

4. It has a self-correcting mechanism sometimes overlooked:

When a government loses popular support, the opposition disproportionately gains members. This strengthens the Opposition in the Legislature, which leads to increased scrutiny of the Government. The Opposition also can work on preparing itself for governing.

For example, if the current BC Liberal Government loses only a few percentage points of support, the NDP Opposition will gain several MLAs – as many as 20 or 30 seats. This will enable the Opposition to better prepare for governing, unless the Government makes corrections that the electorate wishes.

Yours sincerely,
Neale Adams