

SUMMARY OF PRESENTATION

Walter Meyer zu Erpen spoke in favour of Mixed Member Proportional Representation as the best means of ensuring that every vote counts, of improving the political process, of ending artificial majority governments, of ensuring better governance and accountability, of engaging the youth and disenfranchised in our province, and of ending fear-based politics and endless discussion of vote-splitting.

Walter shared his experiences as the Green Party of British Columbia candidate for Victoria-Beacon Hill during the May 2001 provincial election, including his campaign manager Roy McFarlane's support of proportional representation, the negative campaigning and misrepresentation of party platforms during the election, Roy's disappearance near the end of the campaign, and the negativity and stresses caused by the first-past-the-post system being a significant contributing factor in Roy's death.

Presentation to the Citizens' Assembly on Electoral Reform,

15 May 2004, Victoria, BC

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SPEAKING IN FAVOUR OF MIXED MEMBER PROPORTIONAL REPRESENTATION

I am here today to speak in favour of electoral reform, specifically mixed member proportional representation (mixed ProRep).

SHARING MY EXPERIENCES AS GREEN PARTY CANDIDATE IN 2001

As the Green Party candidate for Victoria-Beacon Hill during the 2001 provincial election, I would like to share with the members of this Citizens' Assembly thoughts and personal experiences that have convinced me of the need for electoral reform within our province.

FIRST-PAST-THE-POST SYSTEM DOES NOT DELIVER FAIR ELECTION RESULTS

On May 16, 2001, 19.4 percent or one in five voters in the seven electoral districts on southern Vancouver Island supported the Green Party. A total of 31,985 votes were cast here for Green Party candidates, the most concentrated Green vote in the province. The Green Party share of the popular vote ranged from 14.3 percent in Malahat-Juan de Fuca to 25.4 percent in Saanich North and the Islands. In Victoria-Beacon Hill, I received 21.7 percent of the popular vote (5,460 votes).

Our current First-Past-the-Post (FPTP) system does not produce election results that reflect equitably the desire of voters. Under a more fair electoral system, based upon proportional representation, those who voted Green could have expected their vote to count toward electing at least one Green Party MLA in this region, with the balance of Green votes contributing to the election of another Green MLA elsewhere in the province.

To put it another way, the 31,985 local Green votes are more than the total 31,802 votes that secured three of the local seats for Liberal MLAs Jeff Bray (9,336), Sheila Orr (7,878), and Ida Chong (14,588). Similar arguments can be made using the number of votes received by NDP, Unity and Marijuana Party candidates.

MIXED MEMBER PROREP WILL IMPROVE THE POLITICAL PROCESS

A move away from FPTP election outcomes to results that take in account the percentage of the popular vote each party receives will alter the nature of politics in our province, for the better. The pendulum swing between left and right, and back again, will be replaced by voters voting their conscience and feeling good about making a positive choice, rather than voting against the incumbent government.

That change will move political parties and candidates from superficial and mostly negative political rhetoric to positive election campaigning that demonstrates how a party's policies and platform will benefit British Columbia and British Columbians.

The shift from negative to positive will encourage more good people, including women, youth, and individuals representing minorities, to become involved politically and to stand as candidates.

A mixed ProRep electoral system will result in better, more accountable government, with MLAs representing today's more diverse voices within our province and working together towards real, long-term solutions to issues.

AN END TO ARTIFICIAL MAJORITY GOVERNMENTS WILL RESULT IN IMPROVED GOVERNANCE

Proportional representation will bring an end to artificial majority governments that purposefully set out to undo what the previous government has achieved. MLAs from different parties will need to work cooperatively to implement positive change. They will not be so easily able to wreak havoc through massive, ideological shifts, such as sudden tax cuts without having a sure alternate source of revenue, working forest initiatives that give virtual control of our forest tenure to foreign-owned corporations (supported by both the NDP and the Liberals), and expansion of fish farms that put at risk our wild salmon stock.

Based upon my twenty years as a public servant, I can state that government under the FPTP system is incapable of meaningful, long-range planning. In the guise of three and five-year management plans, government lurches from crisis to crisis, driven by election dates and external events beyond its control. No one from any party can argue that this is good governance. Though I have witnessed waste through poor decisions within the public service, it cannot be compared to the millions blown on political boondoggles that are the pet project of a single political party, such as the fast-cat ferries, computer system and web portal cost over-runs, and the 2010 Olympics.

And so long as government is perpetually in crisis management mode and chasing after glamorous mega-projects, the real issues facing society will never be addressed, for example, the widening gap between rich and poor, learning to live within ecologically sustainable limits, and implementing practical solutions to climate change.

ENGAGING THE YOUTH AND DISENFRANCHISED OF OUR PROVINCE

The youth of this province are our future and their views must be represented in our provincial Legislature for the political system to have meaning for them. In an article about disenfranchised youth, this week's *Monday Magazine* (13-19 May 2004, p. 2) reports that 500,000 of the 900,000

unregistered voters in our province are between the ages of 18 and 34. How is it that our political system has turned off a whole generation of voters?

Nearly every week, there is a peace or protest rally that weaves its way through the streets of Victoria, usually starting at Centennial Square and ending at the Legislative Buildings. The divergent, political views of those standing outside on the lawns, even behind security fencing on some special occasions, need to find voice within our provincial Legislature. That is where political debate should take place, but has been all but stifled because of our flawed electoral system.

What has become abundantly clear to me is that the ideas, energy and enthusiasm of the young organizers of those many peaceful demonstrations need representation among our elected MLAs. The current system fails to do that. One has only to sit in the visitors' gallery at the Legislature to observe the sea of grey-haired MLAs all nodding in agreement with the government's agenda! There are not many elected MLAs under the age of 40. In fact, how many in this room are under 40?

To ensure a healthy democracy and a healthy future for our province, we need to move the voice of youth, of environmentalists, and of other disenfranchised groups into our Legislative Assembly. The disenfranchised generation, that we will in our old-age depend upon, must become involved in real decision-making NOW. Only a mixed ProRep system will ensure more equitable, cross-generational representation.

AN END TO FEAR-BASED POLITICS AND DISCUSSION OF VOTE-SPLITTING

The FPTP system lends itself to fear-based politics and endless discussion of vote-splitting. This can hardly be in the true spirit of democracy. And of course all of this negative political campaigning, over decades, at both federal and provincial levels, has brought politics and politicians into disrepute. Is it any wonder that so few people want to get involved in politics?

In 2001, the FPTP system drove one party to the politics of desperation as it attempted, but failed, to hold onto what had been considered safe seats. And I have been blamed by certain individuals within that party for leading such a successful Green Party campaign in southern Vancouver Island that it cost their party two seats, as well as official party and opposition status. What those individuals fail to acknowledge is that it is our unfair electoral system that is at fault, not my organizational skills.

GREEN PARTY CAMPAIGN MANAGER ROY MCFARLANE (1955-2001) WANTED PROPORTIONAL REPRESENTATION

My strong support of proportional representation was influenced by discussions with my Green Party campaign manager, the late Roy McFarlane (1955-2001). During the last two weeks of the election, Roy saw very clearly what was happening and urged me to

stress that we are providing a choice for voters. And that voters are intelligent enough to decide for themselves. Votes or constituencies do not "belong" to the NDP or any party. Votes "belong" to the voters, and they will decide who they entrust with their support. No party should take the voters here or anywhere for granted. (3 May 2001 email)

2001 NEGATIVE CAMPAIGNING AND MISREPRESENTATION OF PARTY PLATFORMS

Roy was very troubled by the behaviour of both the NDP and the Liberals towards the Green Party – by the undemocratic talk of vote-splitting by the NDP, whom he had once supported, and by the quiet promotion of the Green Party by the Liberals in their fight against the NDP.

Roy was especially disturbed by the NDP's unauthorized and misleading use of quotes by Vicky Husband of the Sierra Club, Catherine Stewart of Greenpeace, and David Suzuki of the Suzuki Foundation in full-page advertisements that implied that those individuals and organizations endorsed the NDP (Monday Magazine, 2-9 May 2001, page 12). Because the quotations were in the public domain, the NDP did not see fit to obtain permission to use them. Legal yes, ethical no!

Three days before the election, with then Premier Dosanjh on Vancouver Island misrepresenting Green Party drug policy and saying that a vote for the Green Party was a vote for Gordon Campbell, Roy wrote:

You cannot scare people into voting for you. The NDP's new campaign undermines the fundamentals of democracy.

A vote for the Liberals is a vote for Gordon Campbell. A vote for the Greens is a vote for the Greens. Each of us has the right to decide for ourselves. (13 May 2001 email)

That Sunday evening, in what turned out to be our last conversation, I asked Roy for his advice about the 90.5 seconds of free advertising that CBC had allocated to each candidate. Without hesitation, he stated:

In this election, people are being forced to make choices they don't want to make.

If we were to adopt a system of proportional representation, as they did in New Zealand in 1993 to avoid problems like this, everyone would vote their conscience and every vote would count.

A major plank of the Green Party platform is mixed proportional representation so that this never happens again.

From my notes of that conversation, much of Roy's wording was incorporated into the statement that aired on CBC radio early Tuesday morning, the day before the election.

Roy's advice was right on the mark about the need to highlight proportional representation, and only days after the election Adriane Carr announced that she would be undertaking a citizen's Initiative to Establish a Proportional Representation Electoral System in BC.

ROY MCFARLANE'S DISAPPEARANCE DURING THE 2001 ELECTION

Roy McFarlane did not, however, live to hear the CBC statement or participate in the citizen's initiative. On the Monday evening before the election, Roy fell into Victoria's inner harbor and drowned.

Reported missing on election night, an international search and rescue effort ensued. When Roy's body was pulled from Victoria's harbor ten very long weeks later (still wearing his bike helmet), the autopsy could not identify the exact medical cause of death. To those of us close to Roy and the Green Party campaign, the only explanation that made sense was a sudden medical

trauma, such as brain aneurysm or stroke, that caused Roy to topple into the water while on the wharves near where his bike was later spotted.

FIRST-PAST-THE-POST SYSTEM A SIGNIFICANT CONTRIBUTING FACTOR IN ROY MCFARLANE'S DEATH

Though Roy McFarlane had other stresses in his life, I know, based upon our last conversations and email exchanges, that the impending Liberal landslide was weighing very heavily upon him. Personally, I am convinced that a significant contributing factor in Roy's death was the stress caused by British Columbia's out-dated FPTP electoral system that fosters negative political campaigning and pits friends one against the other.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

To conclude, British Columbia's voters want to know that their vote will count. An electoral system based upon mixed member proportional representation is the fairest way to ensure that.

I strongly urge you, as members of this Citizen's Assembly, to recommend electoral change and to give British Columbians the opportunity, on May 17, 2005, to vote for a system based upon mixed member proportional representation.