

GETTING IT IN PROPORTION: THE MMP AND STV ALTERNATIVES

How New Zealand Chose MMP

I would like to thank the Citizens Assembly for the opportunity to make this submission.

This submission was prepared to illustrate the decisions that were made in New Zealand which resulted in the adoption of MMP (Mixed Member Proportional representation). I believe these decisions are already the subject of debate within Canada, and even were this not so, the contrast between MMP and the Single Transferable Vote (STV) would be worth exploring by the Assembly.

Many individuals were involved in the final stage of the decision process from 1985-1993, which itself followed a long history of debate in NZ on electoral systems extending back more than a century. MMP, a newcomer to that debate, was preferred over STV for elections to the NZ Parliament as the result of a long process involving Parliament, an independent Royal Commission, the news media, political parties and community organisations, and finally two referenda.

As an outsider, and one with little knowledge of the electoral history of British Columbia, it is not for me to urge the Assembly in one direction or another. I respect all those whose goal is fair representation for all, and wish them well in their endeavours in your country. Yet, though I enter your debate with some hesitation, I am confident that any serious proposal deserves testing, and any good proposal can be strengthened by even the most searching criticism.

I hope that my submission will assist the Assembly to make its own comprehensive assessment of both MMP and STV, as key alternatives to the present voting system used in your elections and in other Canadian provincial elections.

Phil Saxby
98 Endeavour Street, Lyall Bay, Wellington
+64 4 9341779
email: pjsaxby@paradise .net.nz

Personal history

My credentials for writing to you are as follows:

I was one of three founders of the Electoral Reform Coalition in 1986, and its first National Secretary. I held that position for all but one year of the years 1986-1993, when New Zealand adopted MMP. The Coalition was a non-partisan organisation which started by simply promoting awareness of the Royal Commission's report and by 1993 was the principal MMP campaign organisation which won a bitterly contested referendum. No question, the ERC was able to influence the debate at many points, including the 1987 election promise by David Lange to hold a binding referendum on the voting system.

Without the Royal Commission, MMP could not have been achieved. Its work provided a foundation on which the ERC built. The dedication of a small number of enthusiasts in the early years was also vital to long-term success: the twin goals of support for electoral reform and ultimately a binding referendum.

During the lead-up to the referenda in both 1992 and 1993, an independent information campaign was overseen by the NZ Ombudsman and provided excellent, neutral information on the alternatives. In the end, MMP won because it attracted the support of a hugely diverse range of New Zealanders from across all political parties and from outside politics: Maori leaders, womens organisations, churches, trade unions, civic life and so on. This was, in large part, the achievement of the Electoral Reform Coalition.

Alternatives to FPP 1900-1984

For much of the century prior to the election of the Labour government in 1984, electoral systems had been keenly debated. Proportional representation was listed as its first objective at the foundation of the Labour Party itself, during World War I. In the 1920s, Labour was a keen advocate of the Single Transferable Vote and the system was used for local elections in Christchurch City for a time.

After a long period of two-party dominance (1935-65), electoral systems returned to the political arena. The Social Credit Party and Values Party began to advocate electoral reform, and a future Prime Minister, Geoffrey Palmer, wrote in favour of the supplementary member system (that is, introducing an element of proportional representation).

The point to note is that almost all reform advocacy was by the proponents of the Single Transferable Vote. MMP was unknown – the term had not even been invented. Proportionality as a principle had gained substantial minority support by 1984 (at times as high as 40% in opinion polls) but list systems were very little known outside a few immigrant communities with direct experience of them – such as the significant Dutch community.

Preference voting was used in some organisations, including political parties, for internal elections and candidate selections. The use of preferential voting (and also STV) in neighbouring Australia was well known and had some following, but few understood it as leading to a more representative House: STV was undoubtedly the front-runner.

MMP advocated by Royal Commission over STV and other systems.

The Royal Commission's daring recommendation of an "additional member system" it named MMP (Mixed Member Proportional) is documented in its 1986 report, Towards a Better Democracy. On pages 11 and 12 of the report, ten criteria are listed by which the Commission decided to judge the key contending systems, including the existing plurality system, including fairness between political parties, effective Maori representation, effective representation of constituents, and effective government. I commend this report, and its discussion of plurality, MMP and STV in particular, to the Assembly (pages 11-64 of the above-mentioned report).

Why was MMP the victor? Designed by the Commission itself, specifically to meet New Zealand conditions and requirements, MMP was declared to be superior to all other systems. Where other systems had strengths in particular areas (using the ten criteria), MMP was found also to have strengths, sometimes different from other systems, but able to meet all ten criteria satisfactorily. Plurality was subjected to a full critical analysis and found wanting. STV was assessed, and the commissioners were unable to agree on its ranking (p. 64). They did, however, unanimously agree that MMP was the best option for New Zealand.

Criticism of the Choice of MMP by the Commission.

It has been variously alleged that:

- a) The Commission was stacked against reform by the Labour Cabinet.
- b) The Commission was stacked in favour of reform by Geoffrey Palmer (then Minister of Justice).

If (a) was true, it didn't work. What is true is that the Labour Cabinet as a whole gave little or no support to MMP in the three years following the Royal Commission's recommendation.

Option (b) seems more plausible in view of the outcome, and rebuttal has been made to some politically-motivated attacks of this kind. The key deciding issues have become clearer in the years following the Commission's report and are discussed below.

More relevantly to your Assembly's concerns, the Commission has been accused of weighting its criteria towards parties and mediating institutions ahead of the notion that a citizen should choose his or her representative in Parliament. There is no doubt that the Commission treated the question of representation within the broad context of how a modern representative democracy works, and how it can be made to work better. A narrow approach, focussed on the choice mechanism alone, was rejected. Political parties were perceived to be legitimate institutions, with important roles to play in the democratic process.

I suggest the commission was well aware that for the great majority of citizens, their voting preferences derive directly from their perception of political parties. These voters are choosing between political alternatives, represented by parties, not between alternative representatives as such. Of course, the voting mechanism necessarily involves the election of individual candidates, and to them the voting method can be a vital matter. Yet, for most of the past century in all the advanced democracies, party choice has been the overriding factor for the vast majority, and systems that best reflect that reality (such as party-list systems) have tended to replace voting systems popular in (and appropriate to) the nineteenth century.

Key Issues in the Choice of MMP

The ten criteria listed by the Royal Commission (on pages 11 and 12 of its report) tell only part of the story. From the subsequent history of the debate, and statements from the commissioners themselves, it is easy to see that fair representation, and especially fair Maori representation, was the key concern of the Commission – reflecting also the tenor of most submissions it received. Achieving fair representation became the goal; other criteria (such as the need for effective government) acted as constraints on the path to be taken towards the goal. No doubt your Assembly will find itself in a similar position.

Perhaps the major constraint, as perceived by the Commission, was public acceptance (listed last, as item j “Legitimacy” among the ten stated criteria). Commissioners knew the public would be divided on any proposal to change: at least half the population were deeply attached to their single-member constituencies and many would regard FPP as the best or only “legitimate” form of election. Yet, a huge constituency also existed for reform. Public agitation was widespread on behalf of many groups. Many felt that they were denied a fair share of representation in Parliament: women, Maori, Pacific Island citizens, young people.

MMP, by retaining single-member constituencies, was evidently the kind of system which could gain acceptance by partisans of the existing plurality system. MMP could also deliver proportionality (above whatever threshold was chosen) to any group in society that demanded it – most obviously, to political parties but even to social or community interests who did not form a political party but worked through the existing parties. Maori, especially, could reasonably hope to increase their representation in Parliament by pointing out to all parties their need to attract or retain votes from the 15% Maori minority. (Not until this year, 2004, has an overtly Maori party gained representation in Parliament; yet, the huge increase in Maori representation since 1996 has been one of the outstanding successes of MMP. All parties in Parliament have responded to the need to present Maori and other “ethnic” candidates on their party lists. Most parties have set out to, and achieved, stronger representation of women within their Parliamentary ranks, also.)

So, although women and Maori were represented on the 5-member Royal Commission by a single person (Whetumarama Wereta), who was also the only member with known political affiliations (NZ Labour Party), fairness to women and to Maori became the touchstones for reform.

The outcome of its investigation into political systems led the Commission towards MMP: it could be expected to succeed. STV, on the other hand, had not been shown to be very successful in promoting women into Parliament in Ireland prior to 1985. STV was likely to be even less helpful to Maori than to women: in most districts of New Zealand, the Maori minority was and remains small or very small (though growing). STV could, indeed, assist Maori to support the election of non-Maori sympathetic to Maori causes, but Maori have always wanted Maori MPs in Parliament, elected by Maori votes. STV would have preserved the direct link between Maori voter and Maori candidate, but with no guarantee of electoral

success. MMP, on the other hand, allows a voting bloc of 15% of the population to be harnessed, even if indirectly, to support Maori representation in Parliament.

Maori chose MMP: the Maori vote for MMP in 1992 and 1993 was substantially higher than the general vote.

Promotion of MMP by NZ reformers

My submission must inevitably reflect my perception of the historic events in the decade 1984-1993 when New Zealand adopted MMP. I must concede also, that this submission does reflect some of the themes used by the Electoral Reform Coalition in its campaign material.

We appealed to voters primarily on the basis of fair representation: fairness to political parties and the voters they represent; fairness to Maori, fairness to women and other interest groups.

We promoted MMP as a two-vote system: "One vote for a party, One for a person". We set out to show that MMP represented a sort of compromise between the old plurality system and modern proportional systems. In 1992, we were successful beyond our wildest expectations in the "preferendum" vote. In 1993, we faced the bitter last-minute opposition of the so-called Campaign for Better Government, which was able to outspend us by a factor of maybe 5 to 1. MMP won by 54% to 46%.

STV was adopted by the Electoral Reform Coalition as best alternative for local government elections and other, non-partisan, elections. (Local government elections are not, in general, contested by NZ political parties.) Its appropriate, we all agree, to use STV when the choice is primarily between candidates, rather than parties. We have made considerable progress in this country towards the wider use of STV – later this year, my City Council will for the first time ever, use STV for its triennial elections. All District Health Boards in NZ will have 5 elected members elected by STV for the first time also.

At the Parliamentary level, however, MMP has become steadily more accepted despite the initial disappointment in 1996.

Conclusion:

The goal of any voting system should be to achieve fair representation. Fair representation of political parties, by means of a proportional voting system, treats all voters fairly, and in an advanced democracy can embody the conscious preference of the majority of voters for a choice between political alternatives rather than between individuals.

MMP was adopted in New Zealand as a system designed for New Zealand conditions. It was accepted by majority in a referendum after a long campaign based around its attraction as both a proportional system and a system which retained the traditional single-member constituencies.

Thank you again for the opportunity to make this submission. I will be happy to clarify any matters or provide references as needed for the contents.

Phil Saxby
98 Endeavour Street
Wellington
New Zealand

Pjsaxby@paradise.net.nz

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Phil Saxby, New Zealand
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