

British Columbia Nurses' Union

Submission to the Citizens' Assembly

**The core purpose of the British Columbia
Nurses' Union is to promote and protect
the socio-economic well-being of our
members and their communities**

Submitted respectfully by
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Summary

The BCNU submission to the Citizens' Assembly endorses proportional representation as a superior electoral system to the Single Member Plurality or First Past the Post System currently in force in B.C.

Recommendations to the Citizens' Assembly:

1. That the Citizens' Assembly reject the current model of electing Members of the Legislative Assembly used in British Columbia.
2. That the Citizens' Assembly bring forward the concept of proportional representation as the centre piece of proposed electoral reform in British Columbia.
3. That in-depth consideration be given to the usage of a Mixed Member Proportional (MMP) System of proportional representation in B.C.
4. That the public be engaged in the Citizens' Assembly review of a possible Mixed Member Proportional (MMP) System of proportional representation that could be used in the province of British Columbia.
5. That a "reasonable" threshold for representation under a British Columbian proportional representation system be utilized.
6. That the number of MLA seats under a B.C. proportional representation system be a fixed number of seats.
7. That the Citizens' Assembly recommend that a 50% plus 1, or a simple majority be the measure utilized in the question regarding electoral reform that is put forward to British Columbians on May 17, 2005.

Introduction

The British Columbia Nurses' Union is a non-partisan and politically active organization which seeks to influence politicians and the public to support BCNU members' issues which are in line with the BCNU Mission statement, core values and core beliefs. Included in our core values are equality, valuing differences, social justice, honesty, integrity, democracy and participation.

The outcome of the important task which lies before the Citizens' Assembly has the potential to improve the democracy that we participate in at the provincial level. We believe a shift from "first past the post" voting to a form of proportional representation will move our political system to one that is more in line with BCNU values and the values of the majority of British Columbians.

BCNU represents approximately 26,000 registered, graduate and psychiatric nurses in almost every community in the province. The majority of our members (97%) are women. Because of this, BCNU believes we must take a leadership role in addressing issues of particular concern to women.

The current "first past the post" system of voting contributes to the continued under-representation of women and minorities amongst democratic countries. The lack of balance in perspective and experience in our provincial political elections and legislatures inevitably contributes to policies and initiatives that do not truly reflect the full diversity of our society. It also contributes to the continuation of power being held within narrow socio-economic circles.

That being said, Premier Gordon Campbell must be commended for moving the issue of electoral reform forward through a mechanism that seeks to be representative and non-partisan.

BCNU would also like to give credit and appreciation to every member of the Citizens' Assembly for their commitment to undertake this extremely important work on behalf of all British Columbians. We know it is difficult and exhaustive work and that the outcome will in all likelihood change the fundamental nature of British Columbia's democracy and our history for years to come.

"...remember that you are building the very warp and woof of democracy and that you and I, if we serve our day and generation, will someday have the privilege of knowing that because of the small part we were able to play we shall leave this province a better place than we found it."

(Premier T.C. Douglas, March 13, 1951 - from a speech to the Saskatchewan Association of Rural Municipalities - Source: "Tommy Douglas Speaks", edited by L.D. Lovick)

Overview statement

The British Columbia Nurses' Union believes that an effective and inclusive democracy is essential to the creation of a fair and equitable society. In 2004, the challenges and the opportunities for British Columbia are perhaps as great as we have ever faced.

The very fabric of governance in our province is shifting from one where our public services and policies are created and delivered by a public service which operates as a servant to the government and the people, to a province where large corporate interests and world economic agendas drive our government's initiatives and services.

We do not believe that the majority of British Columbians support this shift away from a democracy which promotes community and individual empowerment. We also believe that the time has come for British Columbia to move to a system of voting that more accurately reflects the will of the people.

"Voting systems have a simple but very important role in democracy - to allocate legislative seats according to the will of voters." (Source: "Make Every Vote Count - The Citizens' campaign for Voting System Reform" - Fair Vote Canada)

Our current "first past the post" system has been rejected by most major democracies and is contributing to a sense of alienation and frustration amongst people who want to believe in and participate in democratic governance in British Columbia. For a healthy democracy to flourish people must feel they are fairly represented. **"First Past the Post" voting does not accurately reflect the popular will in our legislature.** In the 2001 election the BC Liberals received 58% of the popular vote and 97% of the seats. **People, rightly so, have decided that their votes simply do not count in the current system.** The 42% of British Columbians who voted for someone other than the "winner" were rewarded with only two New Democrat representatives. Their votes simply did not count. This, in turn, has reduced participation in our electoral system by the population at large and particularly by youth.

Since 1984, voter turnouts have declined 19% and in the 2001 provincial election only 63% of registered voters showed up to vote. In the last federal election voter turnout of our young people was less than 25%. **In almost every country which has adopted a system of proportional representation voter turnout has increased.**

Canada's Charter of Rights and Freedoms protects our basic rights and freedoms including Section 15 on Equality Rights which states:

"Every individual is equal before and under the law and has the right to equal protection and equal benefit of the law without discrimination and, in particular, without discrimination based on race, national or ethnic origin, colour, religion, sex, age or mental or physical disability."

Some argue that every voter is not equal before and under the law under our current voting system as all votes are clearly not equal in their effect. Additionally, given the current level of representation of women in Canadian legislatures, a mere 20%, one might be inclined to say that the present voting system is in fact discriminatory.

"The unfairness of election laws that give representation in legislatures only to candidates who win the most votes in geographically defined constituencies is widely understood in other parts of the world." (Source: *"Making Democracies Constitutional"* David Beatty, J. Robert Prichard and Anne E. Wilson, Chair in Law and Public Policy, Faculty of Law, University of Toronto)

It is an unfortunate reality that our present democratic institutions largely exclude women, Aboriginal peoples, people of colour, the poor and representatives of other minority groups and therefore discourage broad participation in democratic decision-making.

"In fact, the lowest levels of women and minority representation are found in democratic countries using the first past the post system."

(Source: *"Renewing Democracy: Debating Electoral Reform in Canada"*, Law Commission of Canada, 2002)

The experiences in other jurisdictions indicate that changing to a proportional representation system can assist in the election of a more representative government.

"Generally speaking, electoral systems which incorporate higher "district magnitudes and proportional representation list systems are more likely to produce women in the legislature." (Source: *"Why electoral reform?"*, Fact Sheet #5 - Citizens' Assembly on Electoral Reform, 2004)

British Columbians are also distressed and generally "fed up" with confrontational and black and white, positional political governance. People have to compromise and negotiate challenging and difficult issues every day in their working and private lives, yet when they look at their political leaders they see very little genuine, effective debate. Policies and laws don't seem to represent a broad consensus of opinion. Instead the wild swings in majority "winner take all" governments, results in heavy-handed ideologically-driven political agendas that are implemented with little involvement of the population and with no accountability to the electorate between elections.

If we had an effective and representative opposition, perhaps this would not be the case. Our governments would be held to account for their actions, not just at election time, but during their terms of office. Debate on critical issues would be comprehensive and respectful in nature because parties and legislators would have to learn to work together more effectively. The absence of "false majorities" would allow well-constructed dialogue and timely implementation of policies.

The final point we would like to make is that now is the time to reform our voting system. There is a large public consensus that the current system is ineffective and there is a mechanism to implement change with the input of all British Columbians.

"In 1996, less than half of British Columbians supported a form of proportional representation. Today, over 75% favour the introduction of a proportional system for electing MLAs." (Source: *"Revitalizing Our Democracy"*, The NDP Framework for Electoral Reform)

"The BC Liberals who publicly declared their support for Pro Rep in 1996 have committed to a Citizens' Assembly on electoral reform, including Pro Rep."
(Source: *"Free Your Vote"*, written and produced by the Volunteer Pro Rep Team, 2002)

Conclusion

The British Columbia Nurses' Union believes that our current "first past the post" voting system in B.C. needs to be changed to one which is proportionally representative. We support the majority of British Columbians who favour the introduction of an electoral system based on Proportional Representation. This change in our voting system will improve our province and our democratic governance system in many ways, most notably by:

- * **making every vote count and making all votes equal.**
- * **improving the representation of women and other minorities in our governments.**
- * **creating governments that are more balanced and consensus-based in their operation.**
- * **increasing the voter turnout particularly amongst young people who by and large are not registered and do not vote.**

The BC Nurses' Union makes the following recommendations to the Citizens' Assembly:

1. That the Citizens' Assembly reject the current model of electing Members of the Legislative Assembly used in British Columbia.

The current system of "first past the post" voting system is unfair because it results in some votes being more valuable or "more equal" than others. It discourages voter participation, diminishes representation of women and other minorities in government and results in governments that are not able to develop legislation through effective and representative debate. Thousands of British Columbians are effectively disenfranchised because their votes are not reflected in the "phony majorities" which result from our present system of voting.

2. That the Citizens' Assembly bring forward the concept of proportional representation as the centre piece of proposed electoral reform in British Columbia.

There is broad public and political party support for a move to a system which is based on proportional representation. A clear majority of democracies has moved to such systems and it is time for British Columbia to utilize the unique opportunity of the Citizens' Assembly to move our democracy forward and improve our government system.

3. That in-depth consideration be given to the usage of a Mixed Member Proportional (MMP) System of proportional representation in B.C.

A simple way to ensure that British Columbians retain their ability to hold their "local representative" to account and still improve voters' fair representation would be to implement some kind of Mixed Proportional Representation system. Such a system would allow British Columbians to vote for their local "constituency" representative and also vote for the preferred party that they would like to see represent them in the legislature. This will in fact broaden voters' choice in designing a government that reflects their will.

4. That the public be engaged in the Citizens' Assembly review of a possible Mixed Member Proportional (MMP) System of proportional representation that could be used in the province of British Columbia.

It is extremely important that public education on the various options of MMP systems be undertaken in the next phase of the Citizens' Assembly work. Although the systems are widely used around the world, it is critical that British Columbians are fully aware of their voting options. This will allow for a truly informed public who can then in turn support the Citizens' Assembly in putting forward the most widely accepted option for a vote in May 2005.

5. **That a "reasonable" threshold for representation under a British Columbia proportional representation system be utilized.**

If there is a reasonable threshold of 4 or 5% voter support required to secure representation, the fear of the creation and election of a wide array of extreme or fringe parties should be reduced.

6. **That the number of MLA seats under a B.C. proportional representation system be a fixed number of seats.**

A fixed number of MLA seats would allow for a system that is closer to the current system and thus more familiar to British Columbians. Fixed MLA seats would also reduce concerns about potential costs relative to expanding legislatures and their related costs.

7. **That the Citizens' Assembly recommend that a 50% plus 1, or a simple majority be the measure utilized in the question regarding electoral reform that is brought forward to British Columbians.**

It is extremely important that the threshold for success for the electoral reform question not be set too high. This could result in the undoing of the valuable work of the Citizens' Assembly and could, in fact, once again undermine the will of the majority of British Columbians through a voting process. A simple majority or 50% plus 1 was the number used in the Quebec Referendum unity question and is the accepted standard of British Columbians.

**"We all participate in weaving the social fabric;
we should therefore all participate in patching the fabric
when it develops holes."**

(Anne C. Weisberg, "Everything a Working Mother Needs to Know" 1994)