

## SUBMISSION TO THE CITIZEN'S ASSEMBLY ON ELECTORAL REFORM

The principles of Parliamentary Democracy with respect to voting, as practiced under the Westminster parliamentary system<sup>1</sup> are long established.

- I A Majority wins. This worked admirably in the days when there were only two political parties. Even with three parties the present system works well, though some candidates are elected with less than a clear majority. The present proliferation of parties, many with emphasis on specific issues, tends to result in more candidates being elected without a clear majority of votes.
2. One Parliamentary representative for each riding. Voters can hold their representative accountable for expressing the constituents views during debate and other Parliamentary business; the judgment on a representative's performance certainly occurs at each election.
3. One person, one vote. This is the great democratic equalizer, it is also very simple and easily understood by all voters.

These principles are very clear and simple, a significantly important factor in any democratic system; any proposed changes should not compromise either clarity or simplicity.

If the above principles are to be adhered to, as seems to be required under paragraph 3a. of your mandate, the focus of change should be to ensure that an elected MLA receives a clear majority of the votes cast. I therefore propose that you carefully consider one simple improvement to the present voting system whereby every voter be allowed 1 (one) alternative vote. This second vote would come into play when:

1. no candidate receives a majority of the total votes cast in any riding, and
2. the votes cast for any candidates receiving less than a specified percentage (for example 20%) of the total votes cast in that riding, be redistributed according to the alternative vote designated to those other candidates who have received more than the specified percentage of votes.

There is no guarantee that this will result in a clear majority for any one candidate but the probabilities are significantly improved.

This proposal may appear to compromise the principal of "one person, one vote", but in effect no voter has two votes; their initial vote is cancelled and replaced by their alternative vote under the specified circumstances. This does allow every voter to make a choice, whether it be for a preferred individual candidate versus a preferred party candidate or for a first or second preferred party. Of course that choice only takes effect under the conditions specified above.

While this proposal introduces one complication to the voting system, it is nevertheless capable of being easily understood by voters and of being easily implemented in the very basic of vote counting systems. The principle of simplicity is not compromised.

It is not expected that this change in voting will address many of the existing deficiencies

in our democratic process. Quite frankly I do not believe we are realistic in any such expectation as most have no proven relation to the way in which we cast our votes. I comment on some of these deficiencies to try and put them in perspective.

- MLA's are subject to strict party discipline and are not allowed to properly reflect their constituents' views. The Westminster parliamentary system is based on full and open debate with free voting except on specified matters, usually votes of confidence and money bills. When an elected representative cannot vote according to their constituents' mandate or to their conscience then we do have a "democratic deficit"
- The percentage of eligible voters who actually vote is declining. It is suggested that a system of proportional representation would reverse this trend as there is a correlation between voter turnouts and the degree of proportionality in voting systems around the world. There is no proven scientific causal relationship between these two factors. Indeed I would suggest the reasons for falling voter turnouts are more to do with individual voter concerns with the behaviour of Governments and MLA's, the lack of real and meaningful parliamentary debate and disgust with the ongoing legislature antics and scandals. Governments must find ways to involve citizens in the political process and improve two-way communication.
- BC politics are very adversarial, with wild swings in policy when governments change as we are now experiencing. This is more pronounced in BC than in other jurisdictions because our two major parties tend to reflect the more extreme right and left segments of the political spectrum, with very little overlap in the centre. Also the absence of real debate and free voting on new policy resulting from strict party discipline has promoted the adversarial approach rather than the seeking of consensus.
- Parties who have no elected representatives yet obtain a significant proportion of votes cast. These minority parties tend to be focused on special but important issues. Governments are elected to govern for the good of all citizens in their jurisdiction and need to balance priorities accordingly; the priority of a special interest party is known and is rejected by a large proportion of voters as the top priority of the electorate. Under the proposed system the minority party voters will have the opportunity to support another party who places the highest priority on their special interest.
- Holding the Government accountable to the Legislature. The most important factor in making this work is a strong and vibrant opposition. Large majority governments with strict party discipline certainly tend to blur such accountability, particularly when the opposition does not hold official party status. And without all MLA's having a clear majority in their ridings it is more probable that large majorities will result from a party receiving a small majority, or even a minority, of the total votes cast in the Province.

I believe that most of our concerns about the way in which our governments work are nothing to do with the way we vote; indeed the increasing dominance of the party over the individual elected representative and the focus of governments on propaganda rather than genuine two-way communication with the citizens seem to be the main culprits. It is

so important to be fully aware of the extent to which changes in the voting system can truly correct the present “democratic deficit”. I am proposing a very simple change to the way we vote, the introduction of a single transferable vote, that will strengthen the application of the Westminster parliamentary system to our democratic process.

The foregoing observations and proposal are made on the assumption that riding boundaries are established and regularly updated by an Office that is truly independent of the government of the day, and that such office oversees the electoral process. Unless this is the case, the whole voting process is open to gerrymandering and abuse.

Respectfully submitted,

Ian F. Gilbert  
902-1120 Beach Drive, Victoria, V8S 2N1  
2505989686  
July 13, 2004