

PRESENTATION SUMMARY

VANCOUVER PUBLIC HEARING
DATED 29 MAY 2004
AT VANCOUVER CONVENTION CENTRE

THE FOLLOWING INFORMATION IS A BRIEF SUMMARY OF THE PRESENTATION TO THE CITIZENS' ASSEMBLY ON ELECTORAL REFORM. IT ATTEMPTS TO CAPTURE THE KEY ISSUES AND ARGUMENTS THAT WERE PRESENTED AND DISCUSSED DURING THE PUBLIC HEARING. IN SOME INSTANCES, THE PRESENTER HAS ALSO MADE A SUBMISSION TO THE ASSEMBLY AND THIS IS ACCESSIBLE VIA THE WEBSITE AT WWW.CITIZENSASSEMBLY.BC.CA BY CLICKING ON "GET INVOLVED". IF SUCH A SUBMISSION IS AVAILABLE, IT WILL BE NOTED AT THE END OF THIS REPORT.

Janet Wiegand

DESCRIPTION OF PRESENTATION

In 1991, the Royal Commission on Electoral Reform and Campaign Financing found that women are the most under-represented group in Canada. The submission will cover electoral systems and proactive measures (applicable to BC) that allow women greater representation among elected representatives.

KEY THEMES

Ms. Wiegand discussed the issue of women's representation in political office. The presenter stated that while women constituted 51% of the population they comprise only 21% of representatives in Victoria. Ms. Wiegand stated that the under-representation of women is undemocratic, and women are often denied the opportunity to be elected as a result of the difficulties encountered in getting onto the ballot. Furthermore, the absence of female representatives results in the marginalization of issues of particular importance to women. According to Ms. Wiegand, increasing women's representation is correlated with addressing certain issues of importance to women including abortion, child support payments, reproductive technologies, and violence against women.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The presenter advocated the introduction of a system of proportional representation, yet acknowledged that this measure in isolation is not enough to ensure the increased representation of women. Ms. Wiegand recommended the adoption of mechanisms to increase the representation of women to achieve parity with their numbers in society and to do so by making the following reforms to BC's electoral system:

1. Adopt elements of proportional representation into the voting system to correct for the current distortions generated by the majoritarian system as well as to enhance the participation of smaller political parties.
2. Implement proactive measures (similar to that used for the Citizens' Assembly on Electoral Reform) to increase women's representation to parity with their numbers in the population. Ms. Wiegand suggested measures that require a minimum of 40% of each gender to be elected as MLAs to the provincial legislature.
3. Introduce campaign finance reforms, particularly with regards to nomination and campaign spending limits.

Quote: With these reforms to BC's electoral system, we can begin to imagine a time when our MLAs reflect the diversity of our citizens and where there are multiple political voices adding rigour and richness to political debates and decisions.

QUESTIONS, ANSWERS AND COMMENTS FROM THE PANEL

Q If we assume that closed party lists can be used to improve the representation of women, you would expect that those countries with the greatest representation of women would use closed lists but in fact of the top ten countries that you include in your paper four have preferential lists and four have closed lists. Can you point me to empirical evidence that the closed list can make a difference?

A I'm going to take back that statement. I have been assuming that there has been a strong desire for closed lists. How the mechanics work, I am going to look into that more closely.

Q You don't appear to address the societal influences enabling the higher representation of women in the countries that you cite?

A Would it make a difference for you to know that the ten top countries with the highest percentage of women representatives have all implemented proactive measures and I think that they are similar to us; not to discount the importance of societal issues.

QUESTIONS, ANSWERS AND COMMENTS FROM THE AUDIENCE

Q Are there not societal changes that need to occur too in order for the representation of women to be enhanced?

A I think you're right. Having women in parliament enables those changes to proceed. We currently have maternity leave as a result of women in parliament.

Q Is the mere fact that you are a woman the factor that would enable you to be put on the list? Is it not the quality of the candidates that matters?

A Absolutely, and not only are women and other marginalized groups excluded in the recruitment processes, those who manage to gain access to the system have to be significantly more qualified to gain the confidence of the party gatekeepers, which would suggest that there are more than enough talented and capable women and that merit is not an issue.