

# PRESENTATION SUMMARY

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WHISTLER PUBLIC HEARING  
DATED 3 JUNE 2004  
AT TELUS WHISTLER 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](http://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.

# Rupert Merer

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## DESCRIPTION OF PRESENTATION

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A discussion of frustrations of 35 years of voting in Ontario and BC. Minority government is often seen as a disadvantage of proportional representation. A brief discussion of the merits of minority government.

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## KEY THEMES

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Mr. Merer discussed a number of problems associated with the current FPTP system including executive dominance of the legislature leading to the existence of a “friendly dictatorship”, and the role of party discipline in preventing effective local representation at both the provincial, and the federal, level. The presenter noted that BC is currently less democratic than the United States, a fact which has resulted in low voter turnout and increasing voter apathy. Mr. Merer expressed his own feelings of alienation from, and dissatisfaction with, the current system which has led him to stop voting over the past 10 years. The presenter argued that the current system was very effective in the 19<sup>th</sup> century when party loyalties were fluid and MP’s were independently established and willing to vote their convictions. According to Mr. Merer, this time has passed as a consequence of the dominance of the executive over public affairs. Mr. Merer argued that while FPTP may deliver strong government, what is really needed from an electoral system is democracy. The presenter stated that while governing under a proportional system may become slightly more difficult, this does not constitute a viable argument against its introduction as democracy was not meant to be easy. According to Mr. Merer coalition or minority governments are capable of dealing with the requirements of governing.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

The presenter recommended the introduction of a system of proportional representation which reflects voter opinions however diverse. The presenter argued for the establishment of an independent body to prevent the gerrymandering of electorates. In addition, Mr. Merer argued in favour of raising the pay of politicians in order to free them from the need to “sell their souls” to get reelected in order to qualify for government pensions. The presenter also supported attempts to limit gaming under a proportional system. Mr. Merer argued that while a system of proportionality may enable splinter parties to emerge this is not necessarily a disadvantage as it will combat voter apathy and ignorance. Finally, Mr. Merer noted that the introduction of any democratic system constitutes an improvement over FPTP.

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QUESTIONS, ANSWERS AND COMMENTS FROM THE PANEL

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Q What did you mean by “the direction” you thought BC was traveling in?

A The fact that this reform process has started is wonderful, and the fixed term is wonderful. If the US had this system George Bush would have been able to call an election 6 months ago when his popularity was high rather than being stuck with an election in November.

Q When you advocate any PR system, do you have a preference as there are many variations within this family?

A I favour MMP as used in New Zealand. It doesn't upset me that the leaders get on the party list and don't contest the ridings. I think that's a good thing, perhaps the leader should be leading rather than getting tied up in constituency politics.

Q How do you feel about the fact that PR systems such as MMP are party based, so the voter doesn't really vote for a candidate, how do you resolve that?

A My point is that FPTP used to work and that's why we still have it, but the factors at that time were different. I still think there is a role for a good backbencher, that's why I favour the mixed system as there is still a local candidate and a list member.

Q What do you think the threshold should be for small party representation in the legislature?

A I think that minority government is healthy, and having the extreme views in society out there is healthy, so my threshold would be lower than most, I would go as low as three percent.

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QUESTIONS, ANSWERS AND COMMENTS FROM THE AUDIENCE

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Q            You mentioned voter apathy; have more people gone to vote when the system has been changed in other jurisdictions?

A            I believe that there is some evidence to that effect, and PR systems tend to have better voter turnout than the United States and Canada.

Q            Can you define gaming in a PR system?

A            In Italy, they put up dummy parties for the list vote in order to maximize their seats.