

## **British Columbia Citizens' Assembly on Electoral Reform 1<sup>st</sup> Weekend : Session 2 (Saturday afternoon)**

### **Politics in British Columbia – What do we want?**

At the heart of any democratic politics is a system of regular elections that allow citizens to make choices about their government and the people who control it. The kinds of choices they make, and the way in which those choices translate into government policies and activities, are shaped by the nature of the electoral system that is used. This does not mean that different electoral systems will automatically produce different kinds of results. It simply means that different electoral systems – and no two countries use exactly the same one – can have a significant impact on a number of important features of the way politics is carried out in a country.

Electoral choices are not quite like other sorts of choices we make – for instance on daily trips to the supermarket we can make personal choices among individual products for things we want.

Electoral choices are different. They are made quite infrequently, they must somehow include a judgment on the past and a preference for the future, and they generally involve a fairly simple decision covering a wide range of issues. If at the supermarket you can fill your basket up pretty much as you like, on election day your choices are typically among baskets someone else has assembled.

Electoral systems are designed to turn our individual choices into collective ones – we don't get to decide on our representative, our votes contribute only a small part of that decision, and it is the ways in which that combination process works that is at the heart of different electoral systems.

Choosing among electoral systems means making choices about what kind of politics and government you want. There are no guarantees involved, but given that different systems do work differently it is important to start by thinking about the kind of politics you want, perhaps also thinking about the features that you don't like, and deciding on basic values that will underlie the selection of a system for making democratic choices.

## THE PRESENT SYSTEM

Under the current system of elections, British Columbia's politics has taken on some recognizable features including:

- Adversarial politics
- Government dominated legislature
- Representation based on geography
- No clear connection between votes and legislative strength
- Simple limited choices for voters

We need to reflect on whether this is the kind of politics we want, and what might be the alternative and consequence of something different.

### 1. ADVERSARIAL POLITICS

Our politics is based on a system like the courts. Indeed parliament is often described as the highest court in the land.

But in our courts there are two sides – prosecution and defence – and it is assumed that the truth will come out if both sides do their job by making their best case and trying to undermine the arguments of the other.

Our legislature is organized this way with a Government and Opposition who operate on the assumption that if they oppose the other side vigorously enough then the best solution to any question will appear.

- Voters act as the judge and jury. On election day they decide which side has the best ideas, and is the best prepared to govern, or needs to be removed
- A system of clear winners and losers
- Promotes accountability as voters know who stands for what, and politicians know that they will be constantly challenged to defend their actions and judged on what they do

*BUT* some argue that Adversarial politics

- Encourages an “our side is right about everything and the other side is wrong about everything” style of political debate
- Forces choices into a simple FOR or AGAINST framework
- Based on building a winning majority rather than creating a broad consensus
- Works best when there are only two positions, two competitors, two political parties. Forcing everyone into one of two camps is often messy and unrealistic – as Alliance and Conservative party members are now discovering!

### *AN ALTERNATIVE — CONSENSUAL POLITICS*

Many political systems operate on the assumption that politics ought to include as many views as possible, that governments should represent coalitions of diverse interests not simply a single winning position. These systems are designed to allow as many different opinions as possible be represented in parliament and even in government.

Consensual politics often means coalition politics in which the distinction between government and opposition is not rigorously drawn:

- Multiple parties are encouraged to participate
- Politics is about representing views not winning contests
- Elections become about indicating preferences not making choices
- Accountability can become blurred if several parties are in a coalition government

*No system is likely to be completely adversarial or consensual but will fall somewhere in between the extremes. Different electoral systems push politics in one or other direction so we need to think which we prefer.*

## 2. GOVERNMENT DOMINATED LEGISLATURE

In our parliamentary system we elect members to a legislature. The legislature is then expected to:

- choose the government and keep it under control
- make the laws
- decide on taxes and spending

In doing these things it guarantees that it is the wishes of the public are what shape public debate and decision-making

Adversarial politics which produces Majority Governments means that these relationships are reversed. Majorities, depending upon strict party discipline to support them, means:

- Elected members vote the way their parties instruct them
- The government controls the legislature and its agenda
- The government decides what is to be law and pushes it through

And with the strong party discipline holding the government together:

- The premier comes to dominate the whole system (the so-called ‘friendly dictatorship’)
- Opposition members are ignored

### *AN ALTERNATIVE — LEGISLATURE AUTHORITY*

If the current system of government dominance depends on

- a majority in the legislature
- strong party discipline

To change the way the system works, one would need to change one or both of those things.

*Majorities* in the legislature are a feature of adversarial politics and they allow for clear accountability at election time – voters know who is responsible for what went on since the last election.

But majorities are very rarely the choice of the voters – only once in the last half century has a BC party actually won a majority of the votes. They are usually artificially created by the electoral system. Other electoral systems are less likely to produce majorities.

When that happens:

- Governments become dependent on the votes of MLAs
- The legislature, not the election, chooses the government
- Elected legislators can play a greater role in public decision-making
- Inter-party bargaining becomes a central dynamic of the system

*Party discipline* is less subject to the influence of the electoral system but some systems will strengthen the hand of the party leadership in deciding who can be a candidate and who is likely to be elected; other systems can increase the role of ordinary voters in determining who gets elected.

Changes in the way the legislature works, and the real power of individual members, would likely have some impact on party discipline but it is difficult to predict how.

*Majority governments, and the easy dominance they then assert over the legislature, are the product of the electoral system. The question is do we want to try and change this? What would be the consequence?*

### 3. LOCALLY BASED REPRESENTATIVES

Our system is based on the principal that we should elect local people to represent the interests of the area they come from. That is a tradition that goes back centuries when most of the population lived in separate communities spread out across a rural society. It is a system designed to:

- Give voters an identifiable representative
- Provide that each community will have its interests defended in the legislature
- Tie politicians to a clearly defined group of voters

One of the real strengths of this system is that individuals know who to go to if they have a personal problem or an issue of concern and most elected MLAs do work very hard to service the interests and needs of all their constituents

However we know that party discipline intervenes to change the basic political relationships

- MLAs vote the party line not their local constituents' interests
- Politicians depend on party voters in their area

#### *AN ALTERNATIVE BASIS FOR REPRESENTATION*

In the 21<sup>st</sup> century should we still elect MLAs on the basis of geography?  
Does it make sense to arbitrarily carve up urban areas into lots of districts when their interests are really pretty much the same?

Would it be more reasonable to recognize that most people think along party or interest lines when they vote?

Should the electoral system be designed to allow representatives to stand for the concerns that led to their election?

Perhaps voters should just choose from or between lists of party candidates and not worry about where the individuals live.

Could individuals be selected on some other basis than geography – perhaps gender or social group or language community?

*Electoral systems that do not rely on local representatives would allow other criteria to come forward. Would that be a good thing? Would voters lose anything of importance if they did not have a single, identifiable local representative in the legislature?*

#### 4. UNPREDICTABLE VOTE—SEAT RELATIONSHIPS

In British Columbia the present system is organized so that the person with the most votes in an electoral district wins the seat. If someone from the same party wins all the contests that party could win all the seats even though they have not won all the votes. The result is:

- A system where there is no regular connection between the share of votes a party wins and the share of the seats in the legislature it wins
- Sometimes a party can win an election with fewer votes than its opponent – this happened in BC in 1996

- The winner may have a greatly exaggerated majority allowing it to do what it wants in an unchallenged way – when this happens it usually means that
- The opposition is so weakened that it can't do the job expected of it in an adversarial system – this happened in BC in 2001
- The supporters of small parties may not be represented at all in the legislature – there are now 34 registered parties in BC, several of which won a significant number of votes in the last election, but only the two big parties are represented in the legislature

The arguments for this sort of system is that it

- Facilitates clear two-party competition
- It keeps small nuisance groups, that don't have much public support, out of the legislature
- It allows the voters to focus on the important choice in an election – who is to form the government
- It has served us well for over a century

The arguments against it:

- It is simply not fair to unrepresented voters or parties
- The legislature does not represent the views of the province
- Issues of concern to some people and groups do not get heard

### *AN ALTERNATIVE*

It is possible to create an electoral system that produces results that are more proportional.

- To do so means abandoning our system of single member constituencies
- Proportional systems focus on parties, not individual representatives

*Do we want a system of elections that will produce a legislature that mirrors voters' opinions on election day or should they be about making a hard choice about selecting a majority government that can get on with the job?*

*Would a more proportional system be better, without going 'all the way' to make the vote-seat numbers match perfectly?*

## 5. VOTERS' CHOICE

Under the current system BC voters are given a short list of names (with party labels attached) and asked to simply choose one of them.

The average voter typically has no say about who is on this list – the candidates are somehow produced by the political parties under their own private rules.

But should elections be limited to such a simple choice? When British Columbians go to the polls do they need to consider a mix of things:

- Personal qualities of the candidates
- The records and promises of the competing political parties
- The provincial issues that are of concern to them
- Local problems the government needs to pay attention to

All this is hard to combine in a simple choice. What if we like the candidate of one party but prefer another party?

### *BALLOT ALTERNATIVES*

Electoral systems can organize the ballots in different ways that allow

- Choice among candidates
- Choice among the candidates from the same party
- Choice among parties
- Ranking the set of candidates and parties, either in groups or as the voter chooses
- Designating an alternate in case the Member dies or resigns (this avoids by-elections)

Is increasing or changing the kind of choices voters actually have when they go into vote important, or would it lead to a more complicated and confusing system?

*Each of those types of electoral systems has a profound effect on the way parties organize and operate. The question for us now is what kind of choices do BC voters want?*

## 6. BC's POLITICS

Thinking about BC politics we might start by asking what works well and what we might like to see changed.

Some of the big questions, all of which might be altered by changing the present electoral system include:

- Would it be better if it were less adversarial and more consensual?
- Are our governments too strong; do they get their own way too easily?
- Do we need local representatives if they are just going to go to Victoria and vote the party line?
- Do we want a more preferential counting system so vote shares and seat shares are better balanced?
- What kinds of choices should voters have at the polls?

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