

**British Columbia Citizens' Assembly on Electoral Reform
2nd Weekend : Session 3 (Sunday morning)**

**Electoral Experimentation in British Columbia (A)
and
Reform Impulses and Initiatives (B)**

A. ELECTORAL EXPERIMENTATION IN BRITISH COLUMBIA

British Columbia (and Canada in general) have been relatively unadventurous in experimenting with different electoral systems, but this does not mean that there have been no changes. An electoral system is much more than just an electoral formula, and many aspects of the administration of elections have been altered over the last century. These have included changes to:

- The franchise (who is eligible to vote)
- The way the list of voters is compiled
- The procedures for drawing the boundaries of electoral districts
- The design of the ballot paper
- The regulation of campaigning

These topics are not matters for consideration by the Citizens' Assembly. There are, however, two areas in which there have been significant changes to the electoral system in British Columbia which are directly relevant to the question of how voters are turned into seats in the legislature of the province. These are the use of multimember districts between 1871 and 1991, and the use of the alternative vote for the two provincial elections of 1952 and 1953.

A1. MULTIMEMBER DISTRICTS

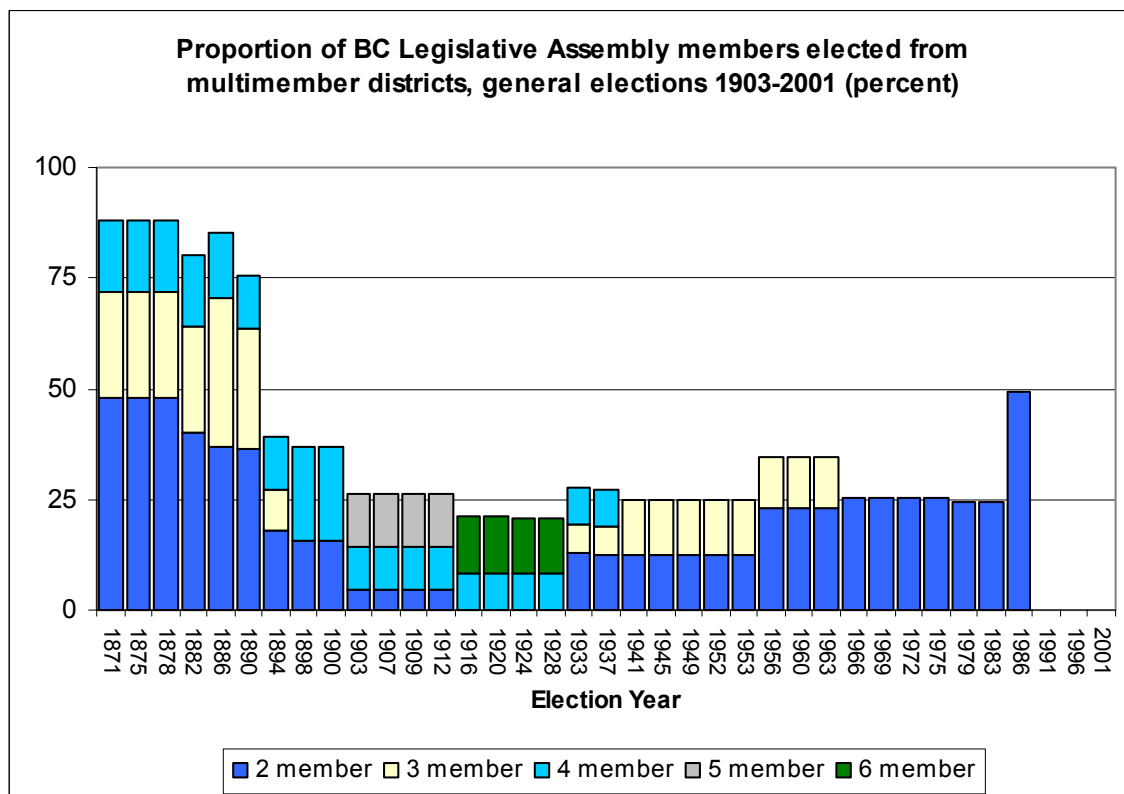
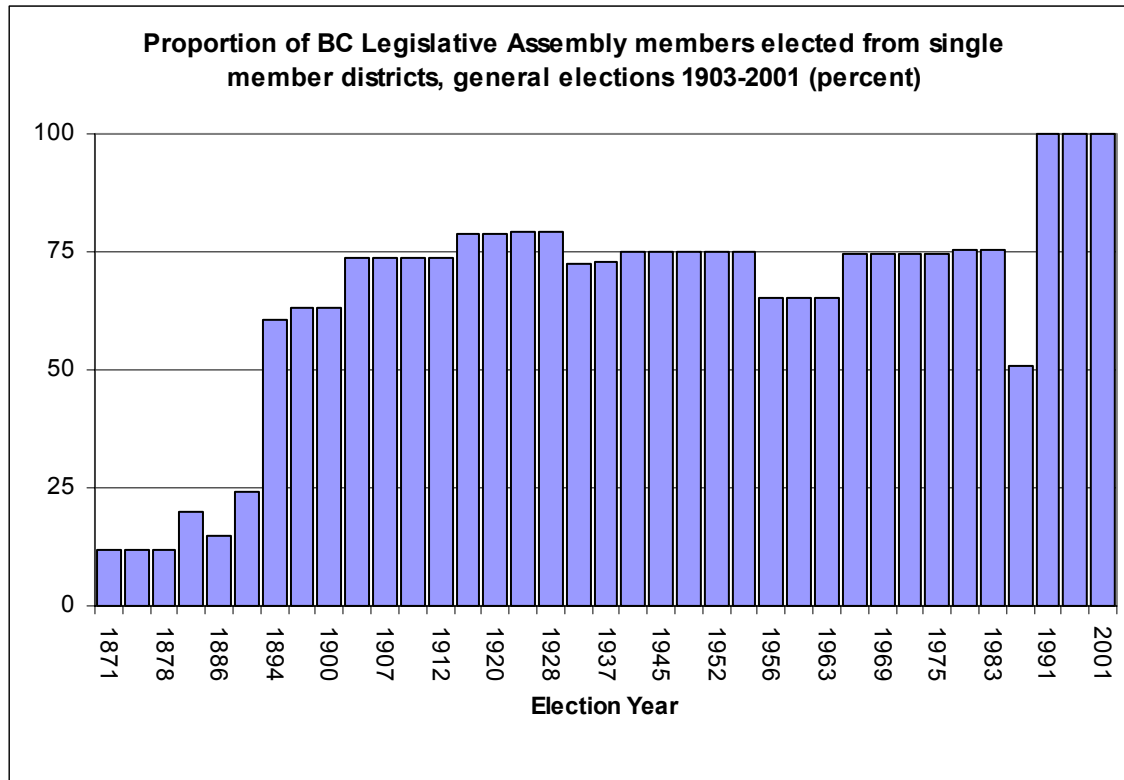
British Columbia had a long history of multimember districts combined with a plurality (first past the post) voting systems. As you can see from the table, there have always been some single member districts but these have been combined with two, three, four, five, and occasionally six member districts. The largest of the multimember districts were to be found in the metropolitan areas of Vancouver and Victoria, but much of the province has had multimember districts at some time over the last 130 years, and 1 in 4 MLAs were elected from multimember districts for most of the period since 1871. Only since the 1991 general election have all seats in the Legislative Assembly been single member seats.

As will be discussed in a later session, the combination of a plurality voting system and multimember districts often produces disproportional results. A party with the most votes in a multimember district, even if less than half the votes, can win all the seats.

But the use of multimember seats is one way of responding to the growth of population in an electoral district without having to redraw electoral boundaries—just add one or more seats to those districts with a large increase in the number of voters.

**BC Legislative Assembly, number of single and multimember districts,
general elections, 1871-2001**

| Election Year | Single member | Two member | Three member | Four member | Five member | Six member | Total members |
|--------------------------|--------------------------|-----------------------|-------------------------|------------------------|------------------------|-----------------------|--------------------------|
| 1871 | 3 | 6 | 2 | 1 | | | 25 |
| 1875 | 3 | 6 | 2 | 1 | | | 25 |
| 1878 | 3 | 6 | 2 | 1 | | | 25 |
| 1882 | 5 | 5 | 2 | 1 | | | 25 |
| 1886 | 4 | 5 | 3 | 1 | | | 27 |
| 1890 | 8 | 6 | 3 | 1 | | | 33 |
| 1894 | 20 | 3 | 1 | 1 | | | 33 |
| 1898 | 24 | 3 | | 2 | | | 38 |
| 1900 | 24 | 3 | | 2 | | | 38 |
| 1903 | 31 | 1 | | 1 | 1 | | 42 |
| 1907 | 31 | 1 | | 1 | 1 | | 42 |
| 1909 | 31 | 1 | | 1 | 1 | | 42 |
| 1912 | 31 | 1 | | 1 | 1 | | 42 |
| 1916 | 37 | | | 1 | | 1 | 47 |
| 1920 | 37 | | | 1 | | 1 | 47 |
| 1924 | 38 | | | 1 | | 1 | 48 |
| 1928 | 38 | | | 1 | | 1 | 48 |
| 1933 | 34 | 3 | 1 | 1 | | | 47 |
| 1937 | 35 | 3 | 1 | 1 | | | 48 |
| 1941 | 36 | 3 | 2 | | | | 48 |
| 1945 | 36 | 3 | 2 | | | | 48 |
| 1949 | 36 | 3 | 2 | | | | 48 |
| 1952 | 36 | 3 | 2 | | | | 48 |
| 1953 | 36 | 3 | 2 | | | | 48 |
| 1956 | 34 | 6 | 2 | | | | 52 |
| 1960 | 34 | 6 | 2 | | | | 52 |
| 1963 | 34 | 6 | 2 | | | | 52 |
| 1966 | 41 | 7 | | | | | 55 |
| 1969 | 41 | 7 | | | | | 55 |
| 1972 | 41 | 7 | | | | | 55 |
| 1975 | 41 | 7 | | | | | 55 |
| 1979 | 43 | 7 | | | | | 57 |
| 1983 | 43 | 7 | | | | | 57 |
| 1986 | 35 | 17 | | | | | 69 |
| 1991 | 75 | | | | | | 75 |
| 1996 | 75 | | | | | | 75 |
| 2001 | 79 | | | | | | 79 |



A2. THE ALTERNATIVE VOTE

British Columbia adopted an alternative vote (AV) electoral system for the 1952 and 1953 provincial general elections. This requires a preferential ballot (see below), a topic which we will examine more fully at the next weekend meeting. The AV electoral system was introduced by the Liberal and Conservative coalition government which was in power in British Columbia from 1941 until 1952. The fact that the coalition was defeated in spite of an electoral system which was supposed to work to its benefit, is an excellent example of how the adoption of a new electoral system can have unexpected consequences.

The diagram below shows the structure of the ballot used for the AV electoral system in BC in 1952 and 1953. A voter must rank candidates in the order of the voter's preference. The right hand ballot shows a completed ballot paper for the Conservatives which favoured Social Credit as a second preference rather than the Liberals

| | |
|---|-----------------------|
| <input style="width: 50px; height: 20px;" type="text"/> | Joanna (Conservative) |
| <input style="width: 50px; height: 20px;" type="text"/> | Fred (NDP) |
| <input style="width: 50px; height: 20px;" type="text"/> | Neal (Social Credit) |
| <input style="width: 50px; height: 20px;" type="text"/> | Pauline (Liberal) |

| | |
|--|-----------------------|
| <input style="width: 50px; height: 20px; border: 1px solid black;" type="text" value="1"/> | Joanna (Conservative) |
| <input style="width: 50px; height: 20px; border: 1px solid black;" type="text" value="4"/> | Fred (NDP) |
| <input style="width: 50px; height: 20px; border: 1px solid black;" type="text" value="2"/> | Neal (Social Credit) |
| <input style="width: 50px; height: 20px; border: 1px solid black;" type="text" value="3"/> | Pauline (Liberal) |

Once Social Credit won enough seats to form a majority government in 1953, it abolished AV and returned to a plurality electoral system which has continued until the present.

A3. ALBERTA

Alberta has been the most adventurous province in terms of electoral system experimentation. It not only used preferential voting to elect its MLAs far longer than any other province (1926-1959), but used proportional representation by the single transferable vote method (PR-STV) to elect member from the urban areas of Calgary and Edmonton over the same period (see following table).

**Alberta, Legislative Assembly: number of single and multimember districts,
general elections, 1905-2001**

| Election year | Number of electoral districts | Number of single member districts | Number of members for Calgary multi-member district | Number of members for Edmonton multi-member district | Number of members for Medicine Hat multi-member district | Representatives of those on military service (elected at large) | Total members |
|---------------|-------------------------------|-----------------------------------|---|--|--|---|---------------|
| 1905 | 25 | 25 | | | | | 25 |
| 1909 | 39 | 37 | 2 | 2 | | | 41 |
| 1913 | 55 | 54 | | 2 | | | 56 |
| 1917 | 56 | 56 | | | | 2 | 58 |
| 1921 | 52 | 49 | 5 | 5 | 2 | | 61 |
| 1926 | 52 | 49* | 5** | 5** | 2** | | 61 |
| 1930 | 53 | 51* | 6** | 6** | | | 63 |
| 1935 | 53 | 51* | 6** | 6** | | | 63 |
| 1940 | 49 | 47* | 5** | 5** | | | 57 |
| 1944 | 49 | 47* | 5** | 5** | | | 57 |
| 1948 | 49 | 47* | 5** | 5** | | | 57 |
| 1952 | 50 | 48* | 6** | 6** | | | 60 |
| 1955 | 50 | 47* | 6** | 7** | | | 60 |
| 1959 | 65 | 65 | | | | | 65 |
| 1963 | 63 | 63 | | | | | 63 |
| 1967 | 65 | 65 | | | | | 65 |
| 1971 | 75 | 75 | | | | | 75 |
| 1975 | 75 | 75 | | | | | 75 |
| 1979 | 79 | 79 | | | | | 79 |
| 1982 | 79 | 79 | | | | | 79 |
| 1986 | 83 | 83 | | | | | 83 |
| 1989 | 83 | 83 | | | | | 83 |
| 1993 | 83 | 83 | | | | | 83 |
| 1997 | 83 | 83 | | | | | 83 |
| 2001 | 83 | 83 | | | | | 83 |

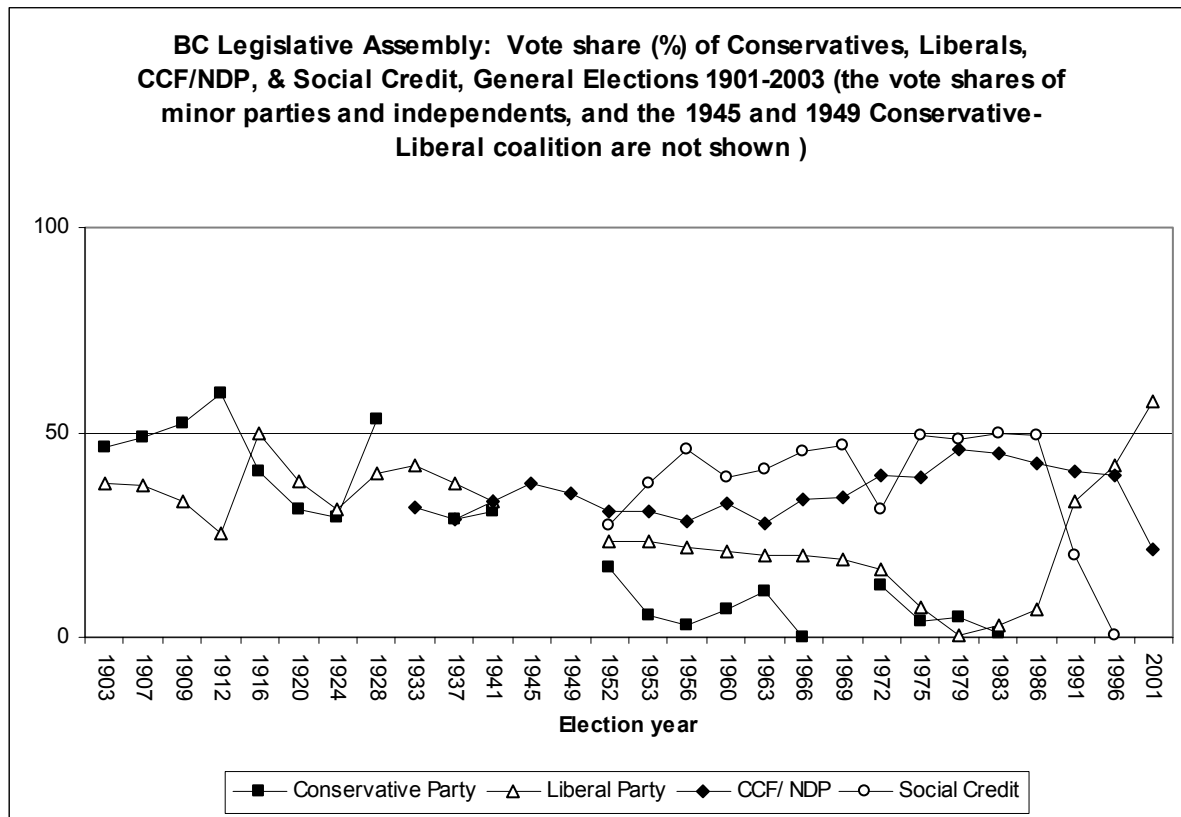
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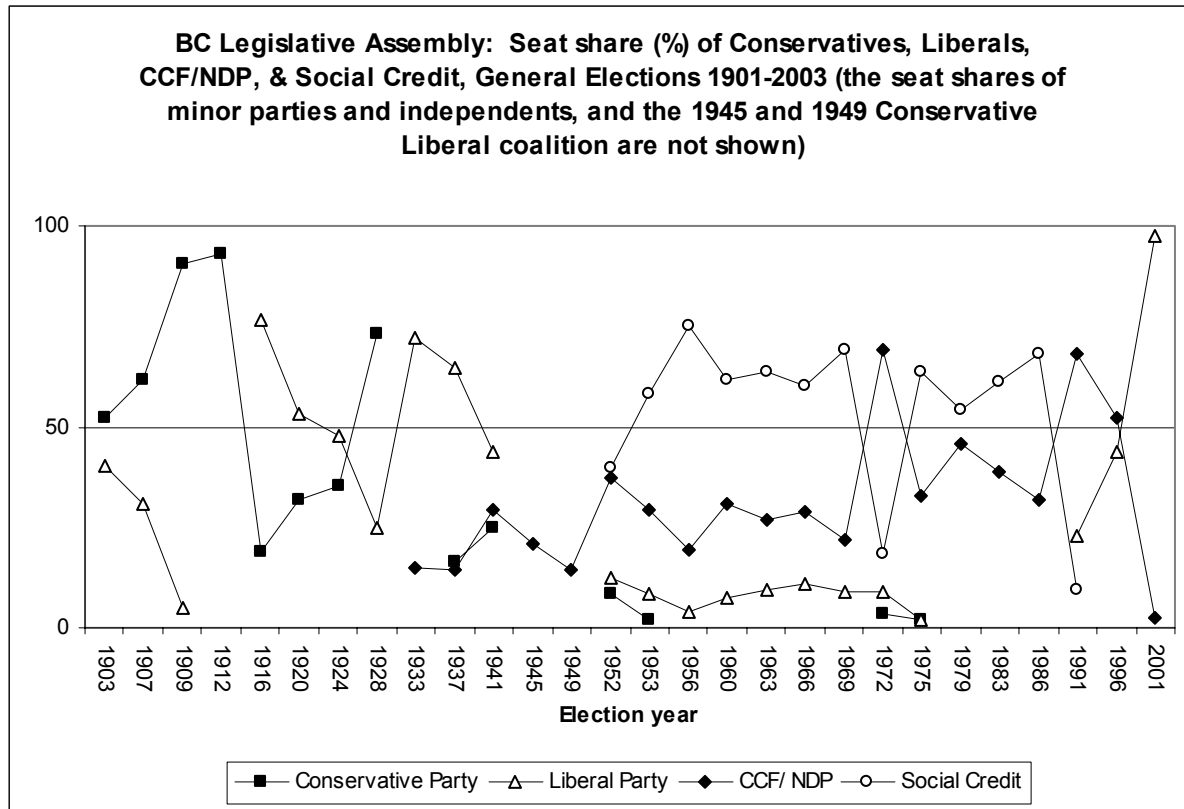
* Alternative vote (AV) used to elect members from these districts

** Proportional representation by the single transferable vote method (STV) used to elect members from these districts

A4. POLITICAL RATHER THAN ELECTORAL CHANGE

Political change occurs in any society. The fact that there have been few changes to the electoral formula for electing members to the BC legislature does not mean that the composition of the Legislative Assembly has been stable. There have been major shifts in political support for parties in the province. The contribution of the electoral system is to shape the way these changes are represented in the legislature; the following two charts illustrate this.





B. REFORM IMPULSES & INITIATIVES**B1. EQUAL VOTES**

Should all votes count equally?

In an electoral system with districts that elect a single member to represent it the number of people in the district is an important key to vote equality. For a very long time the Canadian record was pretty spotty. Rural districts usually had fewer people so that votes seemed to count more in them. To take a recent example from British Columbia in 1983:

| <i>District</i> | <i># registered voters</i> | <i>Winner</i> | <i>(Party)</i> | <i>Winner's vote total</i> | <i>Loser's vote total</i> |
|-----------------|----------------------------|---------------|----------------|----------------------------|---------------------------|
| Atlin | 4,195 | Al Passarell | (NDP) | 1,587 | 1,208 |
| Surrey (2) | 56,576 (103,152) | Rita Johnston | (SC) | 38,081 | 34,082 |

The MLA from Atlin represented 4,195 voters, a Surrey MLA 56,576 or 12x as many. This led to the argument that votes in Atlin were worth 12x as much as those in Surrey. You can see that though he won over 34,000 votes Ernie Hall lost his seat. He must have wondered why with that many votes he was out but Al Passarell could be an MLA with less than 1,600 votes. These differences allowed the NDP to win the Atlin seat with 1,587 votes; the Social Credit party needed 38,081 to win one in Surrey.

In our electoral system the size of districts is crucial. When there are big differences (something called *malapportionment*) then votes do not count equally. This was common in Canada and in the 1960s some provinces moved to reform the process by creating impartial commissions to reorganize their election maps with the goal of making districts more equal in size.

By the 1980s big inequalities still existed in some provinces and citizens went to court, seeking to use the new Canadian 'Charter of Rights and Freedoms' in the constitution to get the courts to force the governments to deal with the issue. After the BC courts and the Supreme Court of Canada declared the BC legislative map unconstitutional, the province adopted a new more equal set of electoral districts and a system for regularly revising them to keep up with population movements. All this has increased the number of urban MLAs and greatly expanded the geographic size of the rural districts.

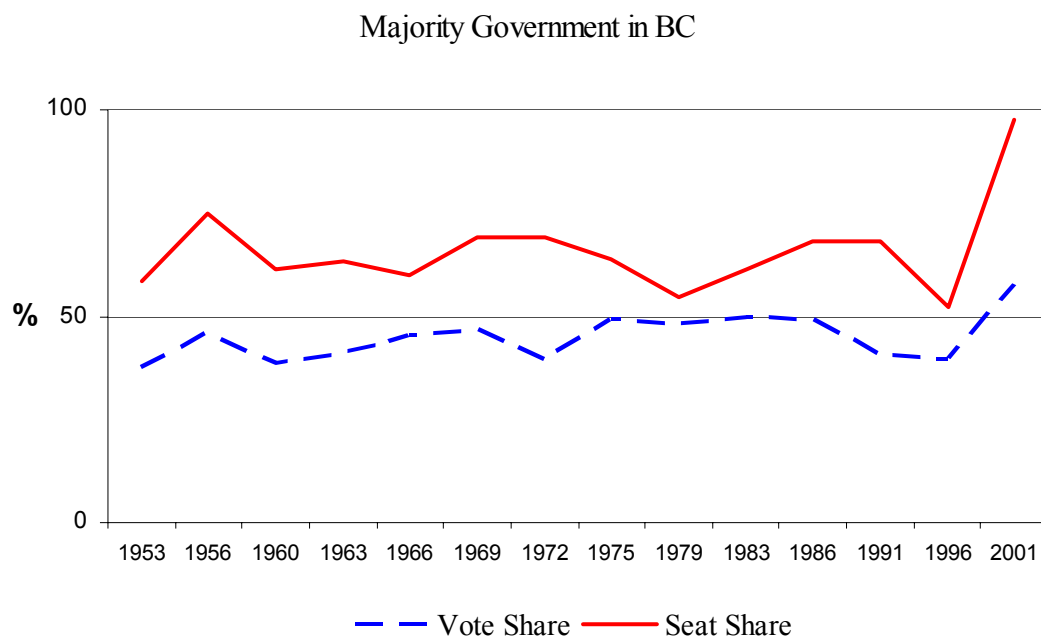
No longer do we have 1983's **12 – 1** differences in voting power; in 2001 the biggest district was Saanich N & the Islands (37,480), the smallest was Peace River South (16,028) – more like a **2 – 1** difference.

Is that difference acceptable **OR** is it still too great?

If we decide to recommend keeping the present system we need to think about this issue for it is one of the factors that contributes to distorting the vote – seat share relationship.

B2. ARTIFICIAL MAJORITIES

Few governments in Canada have the support of a majority of the population. Only once in the last half a century (in 2001) has a party won a majority of the votes in BC, yet every government elected during that period had a majority of the seats in the legislature and was able to implement whatever policies it chose.



How does this happen?

A party does not need to win a majority of the votes in an electoral district to win the seat, all it needs is more votes than any other party. So if it wins lots of districts with less than a majority, the total number of seats it wins may be more than a majority even though it didn't have a majority of all the votes cast in the province.

The principal arguments for electoral systems that have this effect are:

PRO Artificial majorities are necessary to provide us with stable single one-party, accountable government

CON Giving the government a majority it has not earned provides it with a false legitimacy that allows it to impose its preferred policies despite a lack of support for them in the community.

B3. WRONG WINNERS

When a party wins lots of seats by smallish margins, and loses others by larger amounts the totals can add up in a very peculiar way. Here is an example:

Vancouver districts in the 1996 BC election

| District | NDP vote | Liberal vote | NDP win | Lib win |
|--------------------------------|-----------------|---------------------|----------------|----------------|
| Burrard | 10646 | 7975 | 1 | |
| Fraserview | 8774 | 8394 | 1 | |
| Hastings | 9894 | 6345 | 1 | |
| Kensington | 9496 | 7608 | 1 | |
| Kingsway | 10525 | 6997 | 1 | |
| Langara | 5515 | 11038 | | 1 |
| Little Mountain | 9390 | 12036 | | 1 |
| Mount Pleasant | 11155 | 4243 | 1 | |
| Point Grey | 11074 | 12637 | | 1 |
| Quilchena | 4977 | 15509 | | 1 |
| <i>All Vancouver districts</i> | <i>91446</i> | <i>92782</i> | <i>6</i> | <i>4</i> |

So the NDP won a majority of the seats (6/10) even though it won fewer votes than the Liberals. And the one voter in 10 who voted for neither of these two big parties elected no one. When this pattern was replicated across the province, the NDP won a majority of seats even though it had less than 4 out of every ten votes cast and the Liberals had 36,000 more votes overall.

Is this sort of thing common?

Not if we mean does it happen very often – we have had only one case in BC in the last half century.

But yes if we mean is it something that can be expected as a normal part of the working of the system.

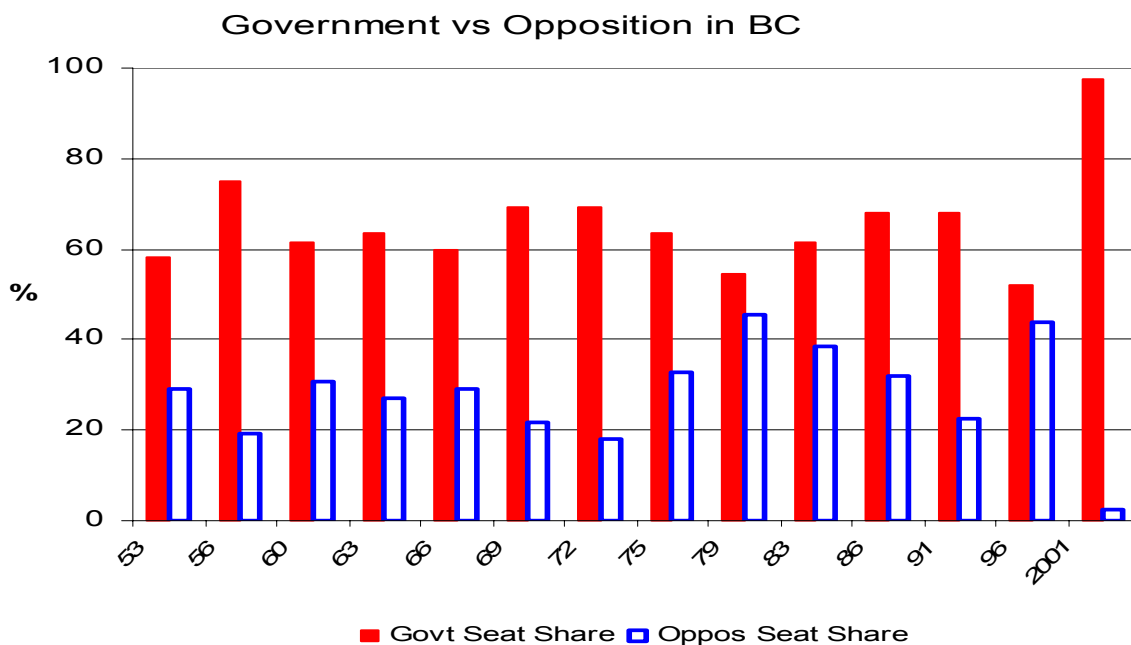
Here is a list of “wrong winners” in Canada over that same period. They have occurred in all but two provinces and twice people have become Prime Minister as a “wrong winner” So we should expect it to happen again, here or somewhere else in Canada.

| | |
|--------------------|------------|
| ✓ Newfoundland | 1989 |
| ✓ Nova Scotia | 1970 |
| ✓ New Brunswick | 1974 |
| ✓ Quebec | 1966, 1998 |
| ✓ Ontario | 1985 |
| ✓ Manitoba | 1945 |
| ✓ Saskatchewan | 1986, 1999 |
| ✓ British Columbia | 1996 |
| ✓ CANADA | 1957, 1979 |

B4 OVERSIZED GOVERNMENTS

Our system of responsible government assumes that the government can be supervised and controlled by an active parliament. And if party discipline has transformed the legislature—government relationship, then at least a vigorous opposition can continue to challenge the government and at election time the public can act as judge and jury by choosing between them.

But when electoral systems give governments majorities they didn't earn they also deprive the opposition of the needed strength to do their job. This makes it easy for the government to dominate the legislature; it also means that the basic arrangement at the heart of our system is weakened. Consider the record of BC legislatures over the past half-century:



BC governments have been, on average, twice as large as their opposition; and the opposition party has had less than one-quarter of the seats in one legislature out of three. In that situation they are rarely able to do much of a job in holding the government's feet to the fire.

This is not uncommon. A review of all the provincial legislatures elected across Canada since World War II indicates that in about 40% of all cases the governing party controlled over 70% of the seats: in almost 10% of the cases the government had over ninety per cent of all the seats in the legislature.

In a few recent instances the electoral system produced either no opposition, or one so small that it had no capacity to do its job.

- New Brunswick 1988 (0 seats)
- Prince Edward Island 1989 (2), 1993 (1), 2000 (1)
- British Columbia 2001 (2)

In those instances the parliamentary system has all but broken down and can't hope to work as it is designed to.

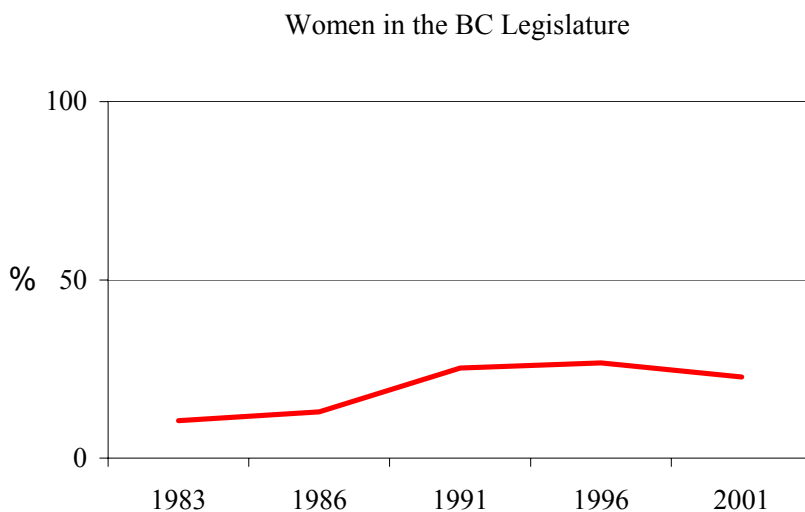
B5. UNDER-REPRESENTATION OF WOMEN & MINORITIES

One of the factors that is provoking debate about electoral reform is a growing realization that different systems appear to make a difference to the proportion of women (or other groups that have traditionally been under-represented in our legislatures) getting elected. [See Farrell pages 165-168]

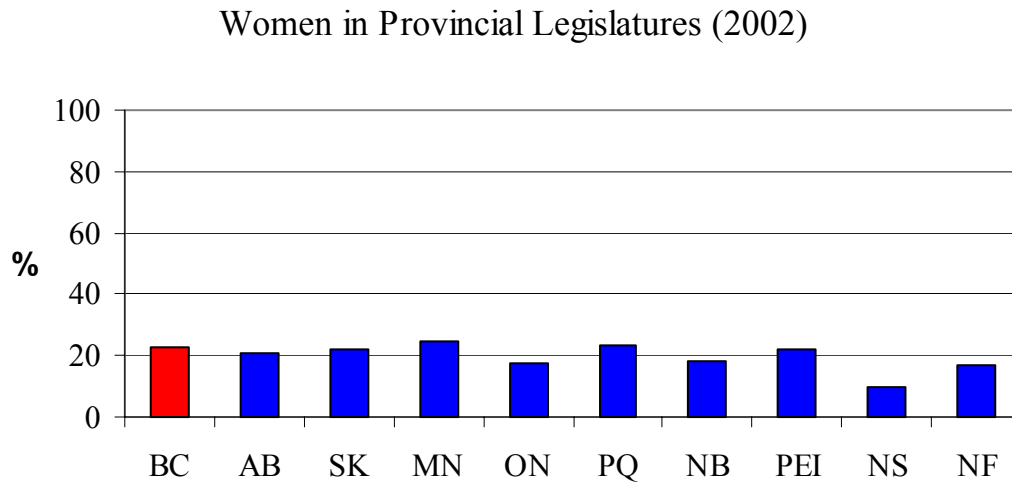
How have we done in BC?

The record of the last five elections suggests the numbers of women in the legislature in Victoria grew quickly in the 1990s but has levelled off or perhaps even declined a bit:

Clearly the share of seats women have in Victoria does not come close to matching their share in the Citizens' Assembly.



How do we compare to other provinces?:

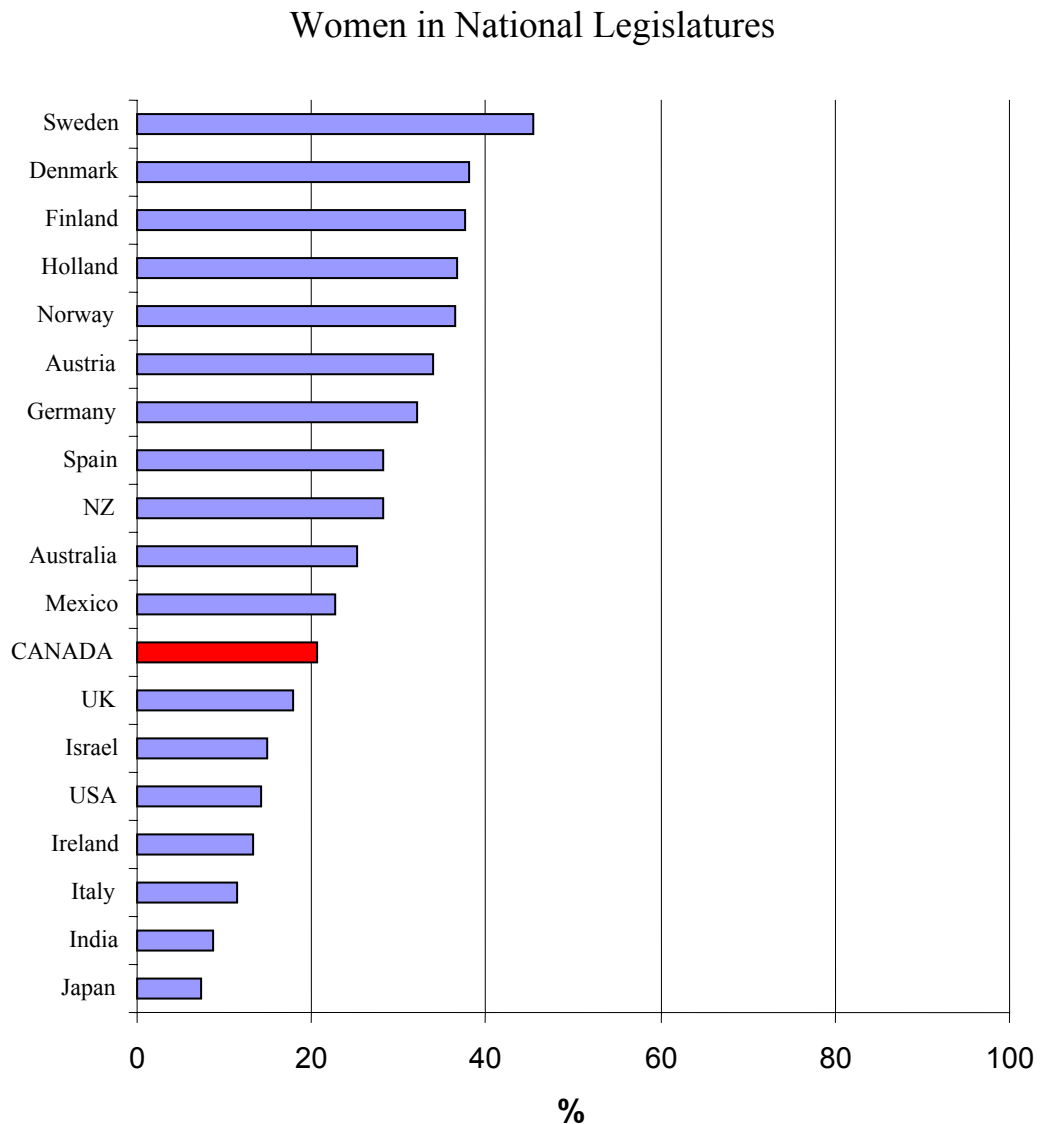


Several of the major political parties have made it one of their goals to increase the number of women candidates they run and so increase the number who are elected to parliament and the provincial legislatures. There was some change but the proportions appear to have stopped growing in recent years and Canada now ranks somewhere down the list:

At the top are the Scandinavian countries with women making up between 36 – 42 % of their national legislatures

At the bottom are countries like Italy, Greece and Japan with women winning less than 10% of the seats.

At last count about 20% of Canada's parliament was women



If these differences were just the reflection of the peculiarities of those countries that would be one thing. In fact the comparative evidence suggest that the numbers of women (or other minority groups) is directly related to the type of electoral system used. Looking at the major postindustrial democratic societies gives us the following figures:

| <i>electoral system</i> | <i>% women in national legislature</i> |
|------------------------------------|--|
| Plurality / Majority | 16.9 |
| Mixed: constituency--proportional | 19.4 |
| Proportional representation (list) | 29.5 |

[For a different set of calculations that makes the same point in a different way see Farrell, Table 7.4 on page 163 This suggests that if the issue of the social composition of the legislature is a priority, or an important criterion, then the electoral system to be used is a relevant consideration.

Why are there these differences?

It is not entirely clear why different systems seem to produce different electoral success rates of this kind. The most likely explanation is that different electoral systems have direct implications for who controls the nomination process, especially for seats that the party can expect to win.

Plurality and majority systems use a system of local electoral districts and in those cases very often the control over the nomination process is in the hands of local party members. With only one or two nominations available there is often a vigorous local contest whose outcome cannot easily be controlled. This gives the central party leadership and authorities limited control over who its candidates are.

Proportional systems that require a party to present a list of candidates in the order they are to be elected give the party leadership considerable influence over who is nominated and ultimately elected. Where the central party authorities are determined to increase the numbers of some types of candidates they can do it simply by fixing who is on the party list and how highly placed they are. In this way electoral systems work indirectly: they make a difference by changing the internal operations of the parties, and especially their nomination and campaigning processes.

B5. PROVINCIAL REFORM INITIATIVES

British Columbia is not the only province tackling the problem of whether and how to reform its electoral process.

Prince Edward Island appointed a judge as a one-man special commission to consider change. He has just reported and his report recommends:

- A BC-style Citizens Assembly be set up in PEI to make a final recommendation and set a referendum question
- A new system is needed and suggests the options that should be considered by the people of PEI are either a mixed member proportional or a single transferable vote system.

The report is online at: http://www.gov.pe.ca/photos/original/er_premier2003.pdf

- **New Brunswick** has just appointed a 9-person Commission on Legislative Democracy made-up of ex-politicians and representative citizens to review its electoral system and a number of other related issues. Its mandate is to produce a recommendation that would give New Brunswick a more proportional system but maintain local representation. It has until the end of the 2004 to report to Premier Lord.
For details see their webpage at: www.gnb.ca/0100/index-e.asp
- **Quebec** has announced that it intends to introduce a Bill into its National Assembly (the provincial legislature) this spring which will provide for a new electoral system. All the evidence suggests that it will propose a German-style mixed system
- **Ontario** has just appointed a Minister (and Deputy Minister) Responsible for Democratic Reform . The government is pledged to hold some sort of “citizens juries” on a number of democratic reform issues and during the election indicated that it would submit them to the people in a referendum
Watch for its website at: Ontario Government ‘Democratic Renewal Secretariat’
- **Yukon** government has appointed a special advisor on electoral reform who is to monitor closely the work of the BC Citizens’ Assembly and then propose how the Yukon might go about reforming its electoral process