

PRESENTATION SUMMARY

CHILLIWACK PUBLIC HEARING
DATED 18 MAY 2004
AT THE RHOMBUS HOTEL

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.

Jean O'Donnell
Marxist-Leninist Party of Canada
(Candidate in the federal constituency of Chilliwack-Fraser Canyon)

DESCRIPTION OF PRESENTATION

Democratic renewal is the urgent need of the time. The Citizens' Assembly should make recommendations for a more proportional system and for the establishment of citizens' assemblies at the local level to whom the MLA is responsible, and for the continuation of the Citizens' Assembly to address ongoing questions of democratic renewal.

KEY THEMES

Ms. O'Donnell discussed the need to address the unrepresentative nature of the current electoral arrangements both federally and provincially. The presenter stated that the Assembly should be fearless in carrying through the solutions it reaches, and not to be bound by the written mandate, as the mandate of the Assembly is really to listen to the people of British Columbia. Assembly members should not let narrow political interests guide their decisions, but suggest whichever model of proportional representation that they feel is best and the province will support it.

Ms. O'Donnell stated that while the Assembly's recommendation must be in accordance with the mandate, the report does not have to be restricted to the rationale for the choice, but should model itself on the best reports done in the past. The starting point of consideration should be the right of citizens to elect and to be elected. As a result of a lack of grassroots mechanisms we have a party dictatorship as parties select the candidates and dominate the legislature. These are issues that the Assembly should address in its report.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Ms. O'Donnell made three recommendations:

1. The Assembly should carefully consider the various proposals for more proportional representation, and recommend an alternative which captures the spirit of the people's demand for empowerment.
2. In its report, the Assembly should not confine itself to presenting a rationale for the model it adopts, but should elaborate on the richness and vitality of the submissions it receives, clarify some of the pressing questions relating to democratic renewal that it has considered, and discuss how the model it proposes will further work for democratic renewal.

3. The Assembly should recommend that the Citizens' Assembly be given a renewed mandate to continue work for democratic renewal and make further recommendations for change in the electoral process to empower the citizenry. Consideration should be given to drafting a second referendum question to that effect.

QUESTIONS, ANSWERS AND COMMENTS FROM THE PANEL

Q How important is it that the legislature be representative of underrepresented groups?

A I think that the key to finding representation is not to look for representation in the political parties but people should be able to come together to choose their representatives. So nominations should take place in the community; the decision over whether an individual gets a nomination is not made in the party but in the community, then everyone knows who has nominated the candidate and who he/she is responsible to. The question of the representation of aboriginal people is crucial. Whether that happens within the existing legislature or through the creation of a second chamber is up to the Assembly. Don't give any illusions that your job is done when you file the final report.

Q How important are political parties to you?

A Parties are important but the proper role of political parties is to elaborate a vision for society; to put forward its views, its message, its approach to solving problems, that's it. Parties should not govern, citizens should govern themselves. That is the key link as far as our party is concerned. Parties don't make decisions, people make decisions. Party government made sense in the 19th Century, but now we have universal franchise, we have to come up with something new.

Q We have a problem with turnout among youth, what would you suggest to encourage young people to vote?

A 75% of young people between the ages of 18 and 30 did not vote at the federal election of 2000. It should not be looked at from the perspective of

blaming youth, but rather that young people do not have any means to participate in the system except for voting day. This is where a standing Citizens' Assembly would be critical. We need to get people involved in the process.

QUESTIONS, ANSWERS AND COMMENTS FROM THE AUDIENCE

- Comment If you want representation for all Canadians, please keep in mind women, minorities, and people with disabilities, as well as aboriginal people.
- Q Do you see technology as being helpful in getting your message out there?
- A We put out a newsletter online every day. But there is no substitution for people talking to each other and you can't do that over the net. It's social consciousness not technology that will provide the solutions.