

"Sino-Canadian Seminar on Public Participation in the Legislative Process"

Beijing, People's Republic of China

A Presentation on Province-Wide Citizen Participation

British Columbia, Canada

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Empowered Citizen Participation

The British Columbia Citizens' Assembly on Electoral Reform

Introduction

The Government of British Columbia has initiated a historic, unique and precedent-setting process on electoral reform. The Government, with the full endorsement of the Legislative Assembly, established the Citizens' Assembly on Electoral Reform. This is the first time in the history of western democracies that a government has given to a randomly selected group of citizens, the opportunity and responsibility to independently assess and review the way politicians are elected to office.

The typical approach to the development of public policy issues where the government is seeking public opinion and review is to establish a commission or board of public inquiry. These bodies usually are led by judges, known experts and practitioners from the field and former political leaders with knowledge and experience in the area of inquiry. After a period of review and contact with the wider public, a paper is produced that may be given broad circulation with an invitation for further comment to be forwarded to government or a specific ministry. Following this process of consultation, the government makes a decision on the actions that it will follow.

The Citizens' Assembly on Electoral Reform, in part, followed this more traditional approach. Gordon Gibson, a former political party leader, was appointed as a consultant to prepare a plan for electoral reform. Gibson was provided with terms of reference that defined the government's expectations and the scope of the report to be produced. In carrying out his assignment, Gibson consulted with experts in the field of electoral reform and individuals with political experience. He produced a report that contained recommendations for the establishment of a Citizens' Assembly. The report was forwarded to government and they accepted many of the recommendations, introduced some changes and then tabled with the Legislative Assembly the Terms of Reference for the Citizens' Assembly.

The unique and precedent-setting features of the Terms of Reference are that people who would be appointed would not be experts or specialists in the field of electoral reform; they would be randomly selected citizens from across the province. Another important difference from a typical commission or government study was that the Citizens' Assembly was empowered to decide whether or not a change in the electoral process should be considered, and should a change be desired, for that change to be decided by the citizens of the Province. The recommended change would be voted on by the citizens of the province through a referendum and not filtered through the government.

Many citizens consider this decision by the Government to be courageous and bold, but a decision that rightfully belongs to the citizens to decide how those who will govern them will be selected. Many people hope that the work of the Citizens' Assembly on voting systems will be the first of further electoral reform reviews.

The Citizens' Assembly is an exceptional opportunity for citizen participation in the evolution of the Province's democratic processes and will provide an excellent and much studied example of deliberative democracy. The Citizens' Assembly is a non-partisan and independent group of 161 men and women of all ages from across the province of British Columbia. We believe this experience will be useful to the China-Canada Legislative Cooperation Project.

Following some initial background information on the Citizens' Assembly and the reasons for its formation, my presentation will outline the key phases of the Assembly's establishment and duties:

1. Selection Phase
2. Learning Phase
3. Public Hearings Phase
4. Deliberations Phase

Background to the establishment of the Citizens' Assembly

1996 Election

The 1996 election for the British Columbia provincial legislature resulted in the New Democratic Party, with 39% of the popular vote, winning more seats (39) in the Legislative Assembly than the Liberal party (33) that had won 42% of the popular vote. Thus, the NDP, with less popular support than the Liberal party formed the government for the next five years. This result motivated the Liberal party to make electoral reform a priority in its political campaign for the next election. In this election the Liberal party promised to implement electoral reform through a Citizens' Assembly.

Fair Vote Canada-BC

A group of concerned Canadian citizens formed Fair Vote Canada (FVC) in August 2000 with the aim of building a nationwide campaign for voting system reform. Fair Vote Canada has established chapters across Canada and is represented in British Columbia with a Chapter in Vancouver, BC. The group holds conferences to advocate for electoral reform. More information can be found on its web site at <http://www.fairvotecanada.org>

2001 Election Campaign

The Liberal Party platform in the May 2001 election included a promise to appoint a "Citizens' Assembly on Electoral Reform to assess all possible models for electing the Members of the Legislative Assembly, including preferential ballots, proportional representation, and our current electoral system. The Election Act would be amended to give the Citizens' Assembly a mandate to hold public hearings throughout BC, and if it recommends changes to the current electoral system, that option will be put to a province-wide referendum."

The Liberal Party won 97% of the seats in the legislature with 58% of the popular vote and clearly had the mandate to pursue its objectives.

Other elections in Canada also have contributed to the growing support for a review of electoral processes. Federal majority governments are often elected with significantly less than 50% of the popular vote. On rare occasions, governments are elected without an opposition as occurred in New Brunswick, another Canadian province where no opposition members were elected in 1987.

Free Your Vote Initiative

A group of British Columbia citizens undertook an initiative in November 2001 under the Recall and Initiative Act of BC called “Free Your Vote.” The objective of the Free Your Vote group was an “Initiative to Establish a Proportional Representation Electoral System”. The initiative, completed in 2002, received 98,000 signatures, which was less than half of the 10% of the registered voters required under the legislation. More information on the initiative can be found at <http://www.freeyourvote.bc.ca>

Over the years individual lobbyists and advocates, including past Members of the Legislative Assembly and cabinet ministers, have pressed for a change in the electoral system.

February 2002

Gordon Gibson, a former Member of the Legislative Assembly and political party leader was appointed by the government to develop a strategy for the appointment, structure and mandate of a Citizens' Assembly to fulfill the government's commitment made during the campaign. The report was completed and tabled with the government in December 2002. Some of the key recommendations included in the “*Report on the Constitution of the Citizens' Assembly on Electoral Reform*” included:

- Citizens randomly selected from the provincial voters list
- Geographic selection based on electoral districts
- Gender balance achieved by selecting an equal number of men and women
- Age stratification provided in the random selection process to ensure appropriate representation by different age groups
- The Assembly to establish its own governance procedures
- The Assembly to provide public access to its learning and consultation processes
- Small honoraria and expenses provided for members selected
- The work of the Citizens' Assembly to be delivered in three phases:
 - Education phase
 - Hearings phase
 - Deliberations phase

April 2003

The Government announced its intention to establish the Citizens' Assembly and the creation of an all party “Special Committee on the Citizens' Assembly on Electoral Reform.” Special committees are committees of the legislature that are given a specific task to perform. In some cases, special committees of the legislature are created to consult with the public on various public policy issues. Special committees report to the

Legislative Assembly on their activities. The Special Committee on the Citizens' Assembly on Electoral Reform had limited responsibilities.

A key role of the Special Committee was the confirmation of the appointment of the Chair of the Citizens' Assembly. The Committee also confirmed the appointment of the other senior staff members of the Citizens' Assembly. The Committee received reports on the progress of the Citizens' Assembly and prepared reports based on this information for the Legislative Assembly. The Chair could consult with the Special Committee on specific issues where additional clarification was required or where advice might be appropriate. However, aside from the confirmation task, the Special Committee did not have executive authority over the Citizens' Assembly and its Chair. It served a liaison function with the Legislative Assembly and was a source of advice for the Chair.

May 2003

The "*Terms of Reference and the Duties of the Chair*" were approved by the government in May 2003. These documents provided the mandate and required authority for the implementation of the Citizens' Assembly. The Terms of Reference were constructed to take politics out of the Citizens' Assembly to the extent possible; by making citizens with current and recent political activity ineligible to serve on the Assembly. The intention of the Government was to make the Citizens' Assembly as reflective of the general population as it was reasonably possible to achieve.

In mid-May, following the prescribed positive review by the Special Committee, Dr. Jack Blaney was appointed the Chair of the Citizens' Assembly.

June – September 2003

Personnel were recruited and appointed to the staff of the Citizens' Assembly in three critical areas:

- Research and Education
- Communications
- Administration

Individuals who were successful and competent in their respective fields headed each of these areas. In addition, these individuals had to be objective and free of bias respecting electoral systems. Similar qualities were sought in the other members of the staff.

From the beginning of its activities, the work of the Citizens' Assembly was open and transparent and every effort was made to involve members of the public in this exciting and unique process. Extensive liaisons were established with the public school system and with colleges and universities. Contact was made with the British Columbia Teachers Federation, the British Columbia School Trustees Association and the post-secondary Political Science Association regarding the activities of the Citizens' Assembly and the learning resources that were available for teachers and students. Many schools across the province incorporated elements of the Citizens' Assembly in their programs.

One group of students made a presentation during the public hearings as a result of this initiative.

Selection Phase – July to December, 2003

July-August 2003

As recommended in the Gibson Report, Elections BC conducted a voter registration campaign to get more eligible citizens on the voters list. The updated voters list would be used to produce the random lists of names for the selection of citizens to serve on the Citizens' Assembly.

August 29 2003

Elections BC prepared a random list of 15,800 names from the voters list stratified according to geography (79 electoral districts), gender, and five age groups (18-24, 25-39, 40-55, 56-70, 70+). Additional randomly selected names were provided by Elections BC where the response in certain age groups was inadequate.

An initial letter of interest was mailed to 100 males and 100 females in each of the 79 electoral districts. The letter provided an opportunity for self-selection based on interest, commitment and eligibility criteria. Thus, individuals could decide whether or not they wanted to become involved in the Citizens' Assembly. 1715 individuals or 7.5% responded positively to the initial invitation to participate in the Assembly.

Invitation letters to attend a selection meeting were sent to 1441 of the respondents. The lower number preserved the gender and age stratification for each electoral district. 1105 people indicated they would attend the selection meeting for their electoral district. Of these, 964 actually attended the selection meeting for their electoral district.

October-December 2003

26 selection meetings were held across the province where more information was provided and questions of clarification were answered. 158 members, one man and one woman from each electoral district, were randomly selected from people who attended these meetings.

An additional random selection was held to add two Aboriginal members to the Assembly to ensure representation from this group.

Owing to a variety of reasons, ten individuals withdrew from the process after being selected and these were replaced, again on a random basis from those who had attended the selection meetings.

The people, who were selected, without exception, were very happy to have been chosen. Their experiences on the Citizens' Assembly confirmed that being selected was a unique, exciting and challenging "once in a lifetime" opportunity.

In keeping with the commitment to engage the citizens of the British Columbia, notices and press releases of the selection meetings were provided to the media in each electoral district of the province. The Citizens' Assembly's staff responded to media (newspapers, radio and television) requests for interviews and participated in open-line programs where the public could ask questions and provide comments. At the selection meetings, people were invited to sign up for regular newsletters about the Citizens' Assembly. This accessible, open and transparent approach also was maintained throughout the learning phase.

Education and Learning Phase – January to March, 2004

Before the members of the Citizens' Assembly could make an informed, considered decision they needed to learn about different electoral systems and listen to the people of British Columbia. The Gibson Report had recommended that the Citizens' Assembly members be given the knowledge they required to make a good decision on behalf of the people of British Columbia. To accomplish this task, two outstanding political scientists from the University of British Columbia were appointed to provide the learning program. An advisory committee of key academics and individuals who had advocated for electoral reform was assembled to advise the professional staff. Experts from Ireland and New Zealand, countries that had implemented different electoral systems were invited to assist with the learning task.

The learning sessions were held every second weekend over a three-month period from January to March, 2004 in the Morris J. Wosk Centre for Dialogue. The following are the key topics provided during the six weekend sessions.

Program Schedule/Topics

- Introduction to the Citizens' Assembly
 - Politics in BC- What do we want?
 - Criteria for evaluating electoral systems: system and voters

- Elections and Parliamentary Government
 - Elections, representation and parliament
 - Political parties and party competition
 - Canadian experience and practice

- Electoral Systems 1
 - Five electoral families
 - 1. Plurality systems
 - 2. Majority systems

- Electoral Systems 2
 - 3. Proportional representation systems
 - 4. Single transferable vote systems
 - 5. Mixed systems

- Changing electoral systems
 - Choosing electoral systems
 - The impact of changing an electoral system
 - Lessons for British Columbia

- Options for Public Discussion
 - Assessment of our current system
 - Are there alternatives?
 - Facing the public – a draft report

All of the learning materials prepared for the Citizens' Assembly members were also made available to the public through the Citizens' Assembly's web site. These materials were posted to the web site after they were distributed to Assembly members. Thus, the details on all of the Learning phase sessions continue to be available to the public and the government has made a commitment to keep the site active after the dissolution of the Citizens' Assembly. The presentations are available at <http://www.citizensassembly.bc.ca>.

Learning phase process

The learning sessions consisted of plenary presentations with all 160 members in attendance and 12 discussion groups of 10 to 15 members led by political science graduate students from universities located in Vancouver. The professional research and education staff prepared the learning materials and conducted the plenary sessions. Prior to each weekend session, the professional staff met with the graduate students, reviewed the objectives for the session and outlined the expectations for the discussions groups.

Each plenary session was followed by a small group discussion session that reviewed the material that had been presented. The graduate students facilitated these discussions and helped the Assembly members to assimilate and understand the material, keep focused on the lesson objectives, and because of their knowledge of electoral systems, serve as an information resource. At least once a weekend, the discussion groups would report back to the full Assembly on their discussions and deliberations.

All of the plenary sessions were open and accessible to the public. Interested citizens and visitors from the United States attended the sessions. Key members of other jurisdictions from across Canada that also are considering electoral reform in their own provinces and territories were regular attendees.

In addition to the learning materials placed on the web site, all of the plenary sessions of the Citizens' Assembly were video taped. These videotaped sessions were web cast through the web site and remain one of the most active components of the web site. Also, the government has broadcast these videotaped sessions several times on its legislative channel that is distributed via cable TV throughout most of the province.

At the conclusion of the Learning phase a report, “Preliminary Statement to the People of British Columbia,” was prepared and endorsed by the Citizens’ Assembly. The Preliminary Statement provided a basis for discussions with the wider provincial community and identified the key issues that the Assembly wanted addressed during the public hearing phase. Copies of the Preliminary Statement were sent to:

- Members of the Legislative Assembly and their constituency offices
- Libraries across the province
- Municipal and regional district offices
- Schools, colleges, and universities across the province
- Mailing lists prepared by the Citizens' Assembly
- First Nations’ Councils across the province
- Relevant associations and organizations
- Members of the Citizens' Assembly for circulation

To reach the broadest possible audience, the Preliminary Statement was translated into French, Chinese and Punjabi. All of these versions were placed on our web site and copies printed upon request.

The importance of the learning phase cannot be overstated. The members of the Citizens’ Assembly were randomly selected, and thus, their backgrounds and experiences were very different. Although they shared a common bond of interest and service, their knowledge of electoral reform and electoral systems varied from no knowledge to members with significant expertise on the subject. The learning phase provided everyone with knowledge of electoral systems, a common understanding of the language of electoral systems and provided the members with the background they required to participate in the public hearings.

Public Hearings Phase – May to June, 2004

The Gibson Report suggested 30 hearings be held; however, the initial plan prepared by the staff and approved by the Citizens’ Assembly included 49 hearings to be held across the province. Owing to demand, a third hearing was held in Vancouver; bringing to 50, the number of hearings to be held. British Columbia is a large province and the distances to be covered very significant. Hearings were scheduled in the communities and cities so that most citizens in the province could commute to a hearing in one to one and a half hours from their home. In the large urban centres, multiple hearings were arranged to ensure that all who wished to attend would have an opportunity. When more than one hearing was held in a large centre, the hearings were held over a two to three week period and on different days of the week. This approach was selected to ensure access to the widest possible audience.

For each hearing, four to 16 Citizens' Assembly members from local, neighbouring and distant electoral districts were appointed to serve on a panel to receive presentations from members of the public. The “distant electoral member” was included on each panel so that members from across the province would gain an understanding regarding the local

issues and concerns of citizens in other parts of the province. In all, each member voluntarily attended two to three hearings throughout the months of May and June. Most hearings took place in the evenings, with some on Saturdays to accommodate the schedule of those with evening commitments.

To ensure that members of the public were aware of the public hearings to be held across the province, the promotion and publication of the hearings was important. The Assembly members were a key participant in this process. Each Assembly member became an active ambassador for the Citizens' Assembly. They were encouraged to meet with and speak to groups of citizens, students, seniors and the media. To help them adjust to this new role, the Assembly Communications staff offered workshops on making presentations and working with the media. PowerPoint presentations and short videotapes were prepared and distributed to each member for these events. Additional staff resources were provided to help members prepare their own press releases, thus, providing a local flavour to media releases.

Each member was provided with 20 posters that provided notice of hearings in their local and surrounding communities. These notices were posted in public places and in some instances circulated within the members' own organizations. Copies of the Preliminary Statement were provided to members for circulation and distribution. Advertisements were placed in each local paper a couple of weeks before the date for the hearing. As well, the Citizens' Assembly's web site served as a regular source of information on the public hearing process.

To assist the staff with planning the hearings, members of the public interested in making a presentation to the Citizens' Assembly were asked to pre-register for hearings. Registration was possible through an online form on the web site and by faxing or mailing in the request form. The names of presenters, the hearing to be attended and the topic of the presentation were placed on the web site. This service permitted members of the public to attend hearings to hear specific presenters.

Presenters were not subject to any restrictions or requirements except the time available for presentations. They were requested to speak to the mandate of the Citizens' Assembly; however, many of them did use the opportunity to address other electoral reform issues that they believed should be addressed by the Assembly. Some presenters were from outside the local region. One presenter traveled from New York City to make a presentation in Vancouver. Others travelled from other parts of Canada. Several presenters attended more than one hearing in the hope of reaching more members of the Citizens' Assembly.

Presenters were advised regarding the approximate time for their presentation. Each was provided with 10 minutes for the presentation followed by 5 – 10 minutes for questions and answers. The facilitator for the hearing kept track of the time and advised presenters to conclude their presentation so that questions could be raised. Panel members were accorded the first opportunity to ask questions followed by members of the audience. At the end of the formal presentations, members of the audience were invited to address the

Citizens' Assembly members and many of them took the opportunity to express their views on the topics raised during the presentations.

To assist members with their role at the public hearings, a short manual "Public Hearing Briefing Notes" was prepared. This manual outlined the process for the hearing, the role of members and included illustrative questions the members could ask presenters and the audience. The manual was reviewed with the Citizens' Assembly during the last session of the Learning phase and many of their suggestions were incorporated into the document.

The format for the hearings varied depending on the number of people in attendance and the number of presenters who had registered for the hearing. Where these numbers were significant, a formal setting was used. Panel members would sit at a table at the front of the room, theatre style seating was provided for the public and a lectern/podium provided for the presenter. A member of the senior staff of the Citizens' Assembly served as a facilitator for the hearing.

Each hearing started with introductions by an Assembly member from the local region or community. The introductory comments outlined the process to be followed during the evening. Each hearing began with a short videotape on the Citizens' Assembly, how it was established, background information on electoral systems and the work of the Assembly.

The primary role of the Assembly members was to listen to the presenters and ask for clarification and further information. Assembly members were cautioned not to express any opinion on electoral systems to ensure the public could speak freely and openly on its desires.

Members of the public could also ask questions of clarification of the presenters. Everyone in attendance was asked not to be critical of presenters who had volunteered their time to prepare for the presentations. At the end of the presentations, members of the public were free to express their opinions on what they considered to be appropriate models for the Assembly to consider.

In some of the smaller communities, the public attendance was small with one or two presenters. In these instances, the hearings became an opportunity for discussion and dialogue between the Assembly members and the public. Furniture was rearranged with chairs in a circle. The role of the facilitator was to manage the discussion. Assembly members would ask the public for their opinion on different aspects of electoral systems and what members of the audience thought would be the best electoral system for British Columbia.

An information table at each hearing was set up and contained materials on electoral reform prepared by Citizens' Assembly staff. These materials provided a written overview on the work of the Assembly and summarized information on electoral and voting systems.

The presentations to the hearings were summarized by a note taker who also happened to be one of the graduate students facilitating the Learning discussion groups. Presenters were informed at the start of each hearing that their presentations were being summarized and would be placed on the Citizens' Assembly's web site. Placing the summaries on the web site made the key themes of the presentation available to the wider public. The summaries were assigned to one of the following categories:

- Democratic elections
- Democratic government
- Electoral system current
- Electoral system change
- List proportional representation
- Majority system
- Minority representation
- Mixed majority
- Mixed proportional representation
- Mixed other
- None of the Above (NOTA)
- Regional representation
- Single Transferable Vote (STV)
- Other
- Change-Other

Classifying each presentation within one of the above categories made it easier for staff to find presentations on the different topics. It also facilitated the preparation of summary documents on the hearings and presentations.

In addition to the summary, presenters were invited to submit their presentations as a written submission that would then be placed on the web. Thus, each presenter could make the presentation available to the wider provincial community. Many presenters took advantage of this opportunity.

The hearings provided an opportunity for over 400 citizens to make a formal presentation to the Citizens' Assembly. In addition, attendance at the hearings varied from about 20 people in very small communities to over 150 in the urban hearings. In all, over 3000 people participated in the 50 hearings.

From most perspectives, the hearings were considered very successful. Many community members appreciated the opportunity to meet Citizens' Assembly members and to express their views. The 10-minute presentation time was short and for most people, was less time than they needed to make their presentation. To provide more time would have required longer hearings; however, members of the public had a two-hour tolerance level for a hearing. Many people left the hearing after a couple of hours.

During the hearings, some presenters made statements in support of their positions that were not correct. These matters were not always corrected, and thus, could leave the perception with members of the audience, and possibly Assembly members, that the comments and opinions of presenters were correct. To address this problem, the public were referred to the printed information material and the Citizens' Assembly web site. Other presenters would sometimes challenge the "statements of error" during their presentation. Such actions helped raise awareness about possible problems with some presentations.

The following comment by one of the attendees captures the essence of these challenges:

"I just wanted to thank the Assembly for the information put forward in general and at the public hearing I attended on June 1st in Coquitlam.

Not knowing very much about the Assembly or the ramifications of electoral systems, I found the hearing and the informational materials (fact sheets) available at the hearing incredibly informative.

I had skimmed a brief article in my local paper about electoral systems and the Assembly, but was confused and did not understand the relevance of "the exercise". Luckily a friend invited me to attend the public hearing with her. Though we did not stay for the entire session, we both found the introduction and the first half of the speakers' presentations to be incredibly informative. The hearing was well attended and organized, and the Assembly members were open and asked speakers good questions.

I learned a great deal, and now understand how our electoral system determines the structure of our government. I now see the importance of electoral reform. On further reading the materials available at the hearing, I understand the pros and cons of many electoral systems and as many of the attendees at the hearing, I am in favour of electoral reform. I have told many people about the Assembly and the importance of your work.

I wish the Assembly good luck with the future work in store for you! I look forward to the recommendation to be put forward by the Assembly and hope to vote in a referendum next year!"

One of the pluses from of the hearings was that they served as a catalyst for many people to learn more about electoral systems and their implications for the province.

Another challenge for the Citizens' Assembly was the many presenters who were making a presentation as part of a provincial advocacy campaign. Most of these presenters could not answer questions on the model they were advocating, which raised doubts about whether or not they fully understood the content of their presentation. Equally, people who had concerns about the electoral process could not articulate electoral systems that would address their needs. Despite these shortcomings, there were many presentations

that were well thought out and defended ably by the presenters. The hearing process and the quality of presentations assisted many people to gain an appreciation of the task facing the Citizens' Assembly.

Predicting the number of people who would attend a hearing was difficult. Some hearings in large urban centres had low attendance whereas a small community's attendance could exceed the capacity of the facility. For the most part, citizens were very accommodating, but inadequate facilities created an environment that was not the most conducive for presenters, Assembly members or the public.

Equipment support varied significantly from one facility to the next. The Assembly purchased portable equipment; however, transporting the equipment and all of the print material from one corner of the province to the other required additional planning and the goodwill of staff who were responsible for taking care of these needs.

The schedule for the hearings could have been better. Owing to local circumstances, some hearings were rescheduled to accommodate these realities. This resulted in changes that had implications for staff and Assembly members and the movement of equipment and resources. Some of these unanticipated circumstances may have been ameliorated had more time been available to fully research the local situations.

Submissions

Another method, by which the Citizens' Assembly consulted with the public, was through written submissions. The Citizens' Assembly encouraged members of the public to provide their views, opinions and recommendations through submissions. Guidelines were provided to assist citizens who wished to make a submission. Fortunately, most citizens submitted their submissions electronically and these were placed on the web site within a few days of being received. Printed submissions that were legible were scanned and posted to the web site. At the end of June, the Citizens' Assembly had received over 700 submissions and anticipated the number would exceed 1000 before the conclusion of the Assembly's deliberations.

The submissions also were assigned to the same categories as were the presentation summaries. These categories provided a template for summarizing the content of the submissions and made it easier for the Citizens' Assembly members to identify the differences and commonalities among the submissions. Trying to summarize over 700 submissions of varying length and different quality in content was difficult. In some cases, submissions were simple suggestions and recommendations without a rationale that supported the submission. It was obvious that many of these submissions were the result of an advocacy campaign for a certain electoral system.

To assist the Assembly members, the staff prepared a short abstract for each submission and these abstracts were circulated to them. After reading the abstract, members could then go to the web site and read the complete submission or request a written copy from

the Citizens' Assembly office. The abstracts were also placed on the web site and citizens with Internet access could do the same thing.

The hearings and submissions provided an opportunity for a significant debate across the province on the advantages and disadvantages the different electoral systems could provide. A common theme of these submissions was the need for change. The challenge for the Citizens' Assembly is to determine if a change should occur, and if so, what the change should be. That is the task of the Deliberations phase.

Deliberations phase – September to December, 2004

Since the Deliberations phase remains in the future, the actual process for this phase of the Citizens' Assembly can only be anticipated. Preliminary discussions have occurred and the process will likely be similar to that used during the Learning phase. Plenary sessions and small discussion groups will be used. In this phase, the plenary sessions will be used primarily to receive the reports of the discussion groups and to define the task for the small group discussions where most of the deliberations will take place.

The Citizens' Assembly will be asked to consider agreeing on a set of values for an electoral system. Some of the values previously discussed in the Learning phase and mentioned during the hearings and submissions include:

- Local representation
- Proportionality
- Voter choice
- Simplicity
- Quick results

Once the values have been determined, the Assembly members will begin identifying the electoral system(s) that best addresses these values. This will be a major task as the geography and diversity of British Columbia present significant challenges for the Citizens' Assembly to consider. The concepts will be identified in plenary sessions and the discussions will take place in the smaller groups. The Assembly members will need to move forward to a conclusion within the time frame allotted for the work of the Citizens' Assembly.

The Citizens' Assembly is to complete its work and provide its report to the government of British Columbia by December 15, 2004. Once the report has been presented to the government, the Assembly will also provide its report to the citizens of the province. The provision of the report directly to the citizens of British Columbia is a major departure from the usual consultative practices of government. Typically, a report is filed with the government and the government decides when it will be released to the public.

If the Citizens' Assembly makes a recommendation for a different electoral system, the recommendation will be voted on during the provincial election scheduled for May 17, 2005.

During the four months between the tabling of the report and the Election Day, citizens will have the opportunity to discuss the advantages and disadvantages of the recommended change. The political parties, politicians and advocacy groups who have a keen interest in the process are likely to become the key participants in the debate that will ensue.

The Citizens' Assembly process is a 16-month long process that has reached out to every corner of the Province. It has enjoyed the full support of the government and Legislative Assembly and many citizens throughout the province. The media have provided extensive coverage of the Assembly and its activities. As a citizen participation process it has achieved its objectives of raising awareness about electoral systems and engaging members of the public in the debate.

Contributors to the Success of the Citizens' Assembly

1. The strong and committed leadership by the Premier, government and legislature to implement the party's election promise.
2. An excellent plan provided by the Gibson Report:
 - a. Learn
 - b. Listen
 - c. Deliberate
3. A learning phase that ensured that all Citizens' Assembly members possessed a common base of knowledge and understanding of electoral systems.
4. Terms of reference that provided a clear and limited mandate for the Citizens' Assembly.
5. The self- and random-selection process that resulted in engaged and committed Assembly members.
6. The presence of many members on the Citizens' Assembly who had experience in community affairs.
7. The full and energetic commitment of members evidenced in zero attrition and high participation and attendance.
8. Gender balance with a fairly representative age distribution.
9. A meaningful role for members who have the power to make a decision about the electoral system for British Columbians.
10. The independence and non-partisanship of the Citizens' Assembly that functioned on its own without direction from outside parties.
11. The support expressed by citizens during the hearings for the Citizens' Assembly and its process and agenda.
12. The opportunity for the Citizens' Assembly to prepare and approve its own values and rules of procedure and process.
13. The appointment of a capable, qualified and professional staff that enjoyed the support of the Citizens' Assembly and members of the public.
14. The design of the facility, the Morris J. Wosk Centre for Dialogue, that provided a powerful environment that supports dialogue and discussion.

At the outset, the Citizens' Assembly was described as a historic, unique and precedent-setting process on electoral reform and citizen involvement. It has been all of these and it has achieved significant success and support. This participatory model has received significant interest from groups across Canada and the United States. People have visited our web site from 127 other countries. The concept has been recommended to other governments within Canada as an excellent way of involving citizens in issues that should be the domain of citizens.

The implementation of the Citizens' Assembly model by others is listed as one of our criteria for defining success. Time will tell whether or not we achieve this goal. However, there is little doubt among those who have been fortunate enough to be a part of the process that the it has achieved its goals and done so successfully. It is a model for citizen participation that can be used to assist with the development of good public policy.