

PRESENTATION SUMMARY

COQUITLAM PUBLIC HEARING DATED
1 JUNE 2004 AT THE EXECUTIVE PLAZA INN

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.

Greg Watrich

DESCRIPTION OF PRESENTATION

General Elections would give more efficacy to voters if the elections were held every year electing 25 per cent of the MLAs each year on a rotating basis. This would still result in having an election in every constituency every 4 years, but would prevent the possibility of a party lying in a general election and then having almost no accountability to voters for the next 4 years.

KEY THEMES

Greg Watrich observed that, while PR seems popular, he is concerned about direct accountability and does not think that members are accountable unless they are directly elected by a constituency. He argued that the major problem with the current system is that once a majority government has been elected they wield irrevocable power for the next four years until the next election. Recent broken promises have demonstrated that governments do not respect this power. People feel hopeless because they don't have any avenue to express their views over government policies during this time. Mr Watrich suggested that governments are conscious of the length of the four year term and follow a strategy where they introduce the most unpopular policies in the first two years and then lay the foundation for re-election over the next two years.

He proposed that the only way to break this four year cycle is to hold annual general elections for only 25 per cent of the constituencies on a rotating basis. Each member would still sit in the assembly for four years. In this way members would be held accountable each year for the party's performance. This system would force parties to constantly prove their integrity, prevent sudden massive pendulum swings in policy, allow voters to use votes strategically to redistribute balance of power, and would diffuse media hype because elections would become more routine.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Greg Watrich recommended the introduction of a staggered electoral cycle, where one quarter of the Members of the Legislative Assembly are elected each year.

Quote: "Annual Partial General Elections will bring a stronger level of accountability to our electoral system simply by changing the timing of when the votes are counted."

QUESTIONS, ANSWERS AND COMMENTS FROM THE PANEL

There were three members of the panel who sought clarification on elements of the presentation.

Q	Do you think this would work with any other kind of electoral system?
A	My proposal is for use with the current system, but it could work with any system.

Q	Do you think that your proposal falls within the mandate of the Assembly?
A	I think it does because your mandate is concerned with the translation of votes into seats and this proposal simply changes the timing of when that happens. It does not change the structure of the legislature but it would require legislation to change the way in which elections are called.
Q	What do you think the cost would be to the taxpayer to have elections every year?
A	I don't think there would be a huge change in cost, because each area is still only electing a candidate once every four years. The government may spend a little more on campaign information because there are elections each year but that would be the only additional cost.

Comment from panel: There were no further comments from the panel.

QUESTIONS, ANSWERS AND COMMENTS FROM THE AUDIENCE

Following this presentation quite a few members of the audience had questions.

Q	Currently with only two members in the legislature, the NDP has not been given official status as the opposition and I'm wondering how this could be resolved in your system?
A	Over the long term this system would address that problem. At the last election there was dissatisfaction with the NDP and there was a desire to get rid of the government so people voted Liberal to get rid of the NDP. In my system, in the next election only 25 per cent of the seats would be up for grabs so you couldn't have the same extreme results because one party will not win nearly the entire legislature. In fact, people might look at the last election and think we need more members of the opposition.
Q	Would members be allowed to be re-elected or is it one term only?
A	I don't put any restriction on that, I don't think there's any

	reason to argue for or against that.
Q	Would we be living in a constant stage of electioneering?
A	With a system like this there will be constant accountability because MLAs know that every year 25 per cent of their friends are up for election. We already seem to have constant electioneering with all the publicity the government puts out for itself, but I think that with this system elections would lose their novelty and receive less hype in the media.
Q	There is a learning curve for new members, so how would this work if every year there are newbies in 25 per cent of seats in the house?
A	That could be much less than in the last election, where way more than 25 per cent were newbies in the house. In my system, the other 75 per cent will help to bring people up to speed.
Q	How would you choose which 25 per cent would be elected each year? Would there be one region elected all at once or would they be randomly scattered around the province? What if you moved house and missed your election?
A	With any system there are complications. These sort of questions would be resolved by Elections BC who are neutral and impartial, and they would consider all these issues.
Q	In this system there could be a new government each year. How would a government be able to pass major pieces of legislation if their numbers change each year?
A	I don't think that's a bad thing. With a shift in the balance of power each year, the party would be able to put policy in motion as soon as they are elected. It's likely that there would be more minority governments, so parties will have to compromise and make sure that policies are more moderate, so I don't think you'd have major changes in policy direction.
Q	How would this system work with a PR electoral system and multi-member seats?
A	My proposal is to work with the current system. I think if we move to PR, it's really important to maintain that local representation so I think we should have a separate house that is proportionally elected. We could use this system for

	the house with local members and we'd have to think about how to use it for the separate PR house.
Q	In the United States there are staggered elections where they elect 50 per cent of the representatives every two years. What do you think of that system?
A	I think that enlarges the window of accountability and means that governments are only held accountable every two years instead of every year.

Comment: There were no further comments from the audience.

SUBMISSION: NO