

PRESENTATION SUMMARY

COURTENAY/COMOX PUBLIC HEARING
DATED 26 MAY 2004 AT THE COAST
WESTERLEY 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.

Shirley Ward

DESCRIPTION OF PRESENTATION

Proportional representation would, I believe, make our government more democratic. The current electoral system has contributed to the polarized and adversarial nature of BC politics. The Legislative Assembly is becoming irrelevant, with decisions made in the Premier's office and Cabinet and little meaningful debate in the House. Proportional representation would lead to a more representative range of ideas being heard and debated in the House.

KEY THEMES

Shirley Ward expressed support for MMP as an electoral system that combines the benefits of local representation and proportional representation. Her presentation focused on the positive effects of proportional representation on the working of the legislature. Ms Ward argued that the Legislative Assembly should represent the interests of local constituencies, but that FPP reduces the capacity of back-benchers to represent those constituents. She made a number of criticisms of the current political system, including the difficulty for small parties to elect representatives; false majorities; strong party discipline; the concentration of power in the Cabinet, and particularly the Premier's Office; the influence of unelected political advisors; adversarialism; and disruptive swings in policy. Ms Ward argued that proportional representation could help shift power back to the legislature by representing a diverse range of views and making public policy debate more meaningful. She predicted that the tone of politics would become less adversarial under MMP and that individual MLAs would be able to play a greater role. Without a majority, governments would need to become more democratic, because they would need to listen to dissenting voices and would have to justify and explain their policy positions.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Shirley Ward recommended the introduction of a Mixed Member Proportional electoral system in British Columbia.

Quote: "First Past the Post encourages highly adversarial politics because parties feel that an electoral majority gives them a mandate with no need to compromise or cooperate."

QUESTIONS, ANSWERS AND COMMENTS FROM THE PANEL

One member of the panel sought clarification on elements of the presentation.

Q	You don't seem to be afraid of minority governments – is this also the view of your friends and colleagues in the public service?
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A	I think concern about minority governments comes from the anticipation of problems because we are accustomed to majority government. Yet we have seen problems with majority governments over the years too. Coalitions and minority governments can act in a number of forms, either as formal coalitions or as parties who simply come together to vote on certain issues.
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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	During this process, have perspectives from civil servants been included in the information process?
A	(Answered by the facilitator) Anyone can make presentations and submissions to the Assembly, and indeed, some members of assembly themselves are civil servants.
Q	I'm curious whether there have been other recommendations that aren't supporting MMP?
A	(Answered by the facilitator) About 80 per cent of presentations have been in favour of proportional representation. We've had presentations on preferential voting, some on STV, and some in favour of the status quo. I'd like to encourage you to visit our website and read the submissions and hearing summaries that are posted there.

Comment: There were no further comments from the audience.

SUBMISSION: NO