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PLENARY PRESENTATION
TO THE
CITIZENS' ASSEMBLY ON ELECTORAL REFORM

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Majoritarian Preferential Voting: The Wisest Option
Submissions to the Citizens' Assembly on Electoral Reform
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Introduction: Position Advocated

In assessing electoral models, the Citizens' Assembly is limited to assessing the manner by which votes are translated into electoral members. As such, the wisest course for this province is to adopt a Single-Member Majoritarian Preferential Voting model. Since there are relative advantages and no significant relative drawbacks to this system as compared to the current Single-Member Plurality (SMP) model, B.C. citizens only gain and cannot lose by switching to such a system.

What is the Single-Member Majoritarian Preferential Voting Model?

The model is described at length in resources on the Assembly's website. In such a system, a winning candidate must receive 50% of the vote from a riding. Voters rank candidates on a ballot. If no candidate receives 50% of the vote, then the candidate with the least support is eliminated from consideration and the second selections on that candidate's ballot are redistributed to the remaining candidates. The process is repeated until one candidate has the requisite 50% support.

Benefits of Preferential Voting over SMP

1. Enhanced legitimacy

Since a winning candidate requires 50% support of those voting, the constituency may feel the elected candidate more legitimately represents the riding than a candidate elected with less than 50% (a common occurrence in the current system).

2. No more vote splitting or strategic voting

Because of the structure of the preferential balloting system, voters need not consider anything other than their own preferences. Even if a voter perceives that the candidate they support will not win in her riding, she can still vote for that candidate secure in the knowledge that the vote will be redistributed to her subsequent choices.

The ramifications are particularly striking in the following example. Assume there are three candidates seeking election in a riding. 40% of the riding supports candidate X while 60% want anyone but X. The support for each candidate breaks down as follows:

Candidate	Support	Second Preference
X	40%	[irrelevant]
Y	35%	Z
Z	25%	Y

In an SMP system, X ends up representing the riding with 40% of the votes even though 60% prefer someone else. In a preferential ballot, since no candidate receives 50% of the votes on the first ballot, the last place candidate (Z) gets knocked off and her votes get redistributed. If all of Z's votes go to Y, then Y ends up representing the riding with 60% support.

3. Minor parties can better gauge support

This is a consequence of the preferential ballot; since voters will likely rank their preferred candidate first, minor parties will be in a better position to gauge actual support. The necessarily higher support (as compared to SMP) may also help raise the party's profile in future elections.

4. Minor Parties may have a greater role in shaping policy

This can come about if a minor party can get policy concessions from a major party in exchange for encouraging supporters to rank the major party second on their ballots.

Relative Disadvantages of Preferential Voting

The only disadvantage of employing Preferential Voting relative to SMP is that voters might find the ballot complicated. However, the government can employ an education campaign to alleviate the concern.

Relative Disadvantages of Proportional Representation (PR)

As the assembly notes on its fact sheets, there are trade-offs between plurality system and PR systems. Thus, PR has significant drawbacks (along with advantages) as compared to the current system. For example, PR does not produce identifiable local representatives thus losing that direct connection between representative and constituency. The closed list PR model is particularly noteworthy in that it concentrates power further in the hands of party officials.¹ So, although citizens may see significant gains employing a PR system, they may lose a lot as well.

Why Recommend Preferential Voting Only?

1. Little risk

As outlined above, there is little risk in changing to a Preferential Voting model. The only relative drawback is the more complicated ballot. However, this is only a problem if you have little faith in the intelligence of the electorate. Further, the other major majoritarian model (Second Ballot) is likely more costly and, unlike preferential voting, does not give the truest reflection of the electorate's views when electing a single member.²

¹ For this reason, if the Assembly chooses to recommend a PR model or mixed-model, I urge the assembly to reject the closed list model. An open list model, particularly the Swiss panachage model, seems infinitely more democratic.

² See e.g. Partha Dasgupta and Eric Maskin, "The Fairest Vote of All" (March 2004) 290:3 Scientific American 64.

2. Consistent with our electoral traditions

Unlike PR, Preferential Voting will do little to disturb our legislative system. Also, this model is not foreign to British Columbians. Political parties often employ a similar model when electing party leaders. Further, as the Assembly's website notes, B.C. employed this model in the 1952 and 1953 general elections.

3. Non-contentious

For the two reasons above, the move to a Preferential Voting system is likely to be non-contentious. A PR system is less likely to garner consensus. Further, people could raise constitutional objections to a PR system.³

Concluding Remarks

As the Assembly points out in one of its fact sheets, we should not approach this process as the solution to all of our political system's problems. For example, people often cite statistics that suggest more women get involved in the political process when a jurisdiction employs a PR list model. However, there are other models that are more effective in achieving that goal but are unfortunately beyond the scope of assembly's mandate. We can consider such models when there is a mandate to do so. We can reconsider models also. However, at this juncture, it is wiser to recommend a model that is almost guaranteed to be better than the one we employ today: Preferential Voting.

³ For example, with respect to the preamble of the *Constitution Act 1867*.