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PLENARY PRESENTATION
TO THE
CITIZENS' ASSEMBLY ON ELECTORAL
REFORM

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MORRIS J. WOSK CENTRE FOR DIALOGUE

Hello Ladies and Gentlemen:

My name is Tom Hoenisch and I am advocating a mixed member proportional representation system. I do not represent any organized group but I believe that my proposal is similar to what the Green Party is advocating.

The system that I propose would have a 72 seat legislature

Thirty-six seats, whose boundaries would be the same as the federal ridings, would be elected by constituencies, just as they are now. This would lower the cost of government because we wouldn't need a provincial electoral boundary commission and there would be fewer MLAs in total.

The remaining 36 seats would be apportioned by the chief electoral officer to the various political parties to reflect their % of the popular vote.

Any party that gets 5% or more of the popular vote would have a corresponding number of seats in the legislature.

The voter would get 2 ballots.

One ballot would be just like what we have now. It would have a list of candidates and their party affiliations in your constituency. You would vote for whomever you wish to vote for. The second ballot would have a list of registered political parties in B.C. You would vote for whichever political party you chose to vote for.

For the first ballot, whoever gets the most votes is the elected representative for that constituency.

For the second ballot, the chief electoral officer adds up all the votes on a province wide basis. He then apportions the remaining 36 seats so that the parties have roughly the same percentage of seats as they got in the popular vote.

For example, if Party X got 15% of the popular vote, but only got elected in 2 constituencies, then the electoral officer would grant them another 9 seats of the 36 available so that their 11 seats (out of 72) would be roughly proportional to the 15% of the popular vote that they received.

Why do we need a system of mixed member proportional representation?

We need this system so that the make up of the legislature truly reflects the wishes of the electorate. Isn't that what democracy is all about? We do need constituencies as well to ensure that we have representation from all areas of the province. After all, the concerns of loggers from Prince George are different from the concerns of the First Nations of Haida Gwii, the people in the Tourism Industry in the Okanagan, farmers in the Fraser Valley, Fishers on Vancouver Island and the people who live in Greater Vancouver.

The current system favours two large parties. It is as if we live in a black and white world. Well, only extremists believe that we live in a black and white world. The Taliban believe in a black and white world. In fact, in a civil society that respects people's freedoms, public policy should reflect that vast grey area between the two extremes.

The smaller political parties that are so often shut out of the political arena under the system that we have now have a lot to offer in that large grey area.

If we had this system in place before the last provincial election, this is what the legislature would look like today:

The Liberals would have 45 seats to reflect the 57.5% of the vote that they received.

The NDP would have 17 seats, which represents their 21.6% of the vote.

The Green Party would have 10 seats to reflect the 12.4% of the vote that they received.

The Unity Party (3.3%) and the Marijuana Party (3.2%) just missed the 5% minimum needed to receive some seats but they would only have to do slightly better next time to be represented as well.

It is important to note that the Liberals, having an absolute majority, could still legislate exactly as they are doing now, but I believe that with reasoned debate and intelligent arguments coming from different perspectives, the Liberals would have at least moderated their current agenda. Now if this moderation is good or not depends on your political perspective but it is undeniably good that most people would have their voices heard in the legislature. Under a system of Proportional Representation, you could never get the results that we got in the 1996 provincial election where the NDP formed a majority government with 39.4% of the popular vote.

In fact the Liberals, who got 41.8% of the vote would have formed a minority government with the B.C. Reform Party and maybe the Progressive Democratic Alliance (PDA) as their partners.

Another benefit of ProRep is that it would raise the level of debate in the legislature. Have any of you seen a typically raucous debate in that chamber? It often consists of little more than members hurling personal insults and invective at each other while trying to score points with the media.

Now since under ProRep we would often have coalition governments, this would tone down the personal attacks because the person that you are attacking today may be the person that you have to join with in a coalition after the next election.

You would still argue very strongly about different points of view, but the personal attacks, which add nothing to the debate would be gone.

Yet another benefit of ProRep is that it uncouples the vote for a candidate from the vote for a party. For example, a few elections ago on the federal scene, we had a candidate running in my riding (now called Okanagan/Coquihalla) who was a highly motivated, energetic dedicated individual. I thought this candidate would have made an excellent representative for my riding in Ottawa. However, I was not very comfortable with the policies of the party that that individual represented. Therefore, I reluctantly voted for another party that better represented my point of view although they had an inferior candidate. Under a ProRep system, I could have voted for both the best candidate and the Party that best represented my point of view.

Finally, another benefit of ProRep is that every vote counts. Many people simply don't feel represented by our electoral system because unless you supported one of the two major parties you know that your vote won't elect anybody.

This leads to voter apathy, people just not bothering to vote; it leads to people reluctantly voting for one of the two big parties even though these parties don't really reflect their views; and it leads to negative voting where you vote against parties rather than for parties that you like.

Proportional Representation has many benefits that I've just spoken about, but the most important fundamental benefit is that the people of B.C. will finally have a legislature that truly reflects the wishes of the voters. The tyranny of the Left and of the Right will be broken!

Thank You.