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PLENARY PRESENTATION  
TO THE  
CITIZENS' ASSEMBLY ON ELECTORAL  
REFORM

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MORRIS J. WOSK CENTRE FOR DIALOGUE

Presentation:

Jim Nielsen, September 11<sup>th</sup> Plenary Session.

**Purpose of electing or selecting members of the Legislature Assembly of British Columbia.**

The committee has been challenged to investigate what is the best option of choosing MLAs for our province. In reviewing that question the purpose of having a legislative assembly or parliament must be considered.

Electing members of the B.C.'s Parliament is not an end in itself. These persons chosen in some manner may assemble and offer their opinions at chosen times but the purpose of choosing members is to permit the formation of a government from amongst those MLAs supported by the voters.

Debate in the legislative assembly may be entertaining, enlightening and important but unless someone is listening and in authority to act on the matters discussed and decided then there is little purpose of having members.

Therefore a government must be created from among the members chosen. The best manner for a government to be chosen is for a party to have a majority of seats in the house and be called upon to form a government by the Lieutenant-Governor and then provide the needed leadership required to conduct the business of the people of British Columbia.

**Provincial political mythology:**

**Minority governments are good for the people and the province:**

History would suggest the residents of B.C. do not agree. Since elections were held along party lines from 1903 there have been only three instances of a minority government resulting from a general election. That was in 1924, 1941 and 1952. If the voters of B.C. believed minority government was the preferred option then the results of those elections would reflect that opinion.

British Columbians have elected...28 governments since 1903. Of those...25...have been majorities.

Below- a thirty-year snapshot of election results in B.C. All majority governments.

### Stability and predictability

year	winner	vote	seats	second	vote	seats		
1956	SC	46%	39	CCF	28%	10		
1960	SC	39%	32	CCF	33%	16		
1963	SC	41%	33	NDP	28%	14		
1966	SC	46%	33	NDP	34%	16		
1969	SC	47%	38	NDP	34%	12		
<b>1972</b>	<b>NDP</b>	<b>40%</b>	<b>38</b>	<b>SC</b>	<b>31%</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>change</b>	s/c c
<b>1975</b>	<b>SC</b>	<b>49%</b>	<b>35</b>	<b>NDP</b>	<b>39%</b>	<b>18</b>	<b>change</b>	s/c c
1979	SC	48%	31	NDP	46%	26		s/c c
1983	SC	50%	35	NDP	45%	22		s/c c
1986	SC	49%	47	NDP	42%	22		s/c c

Coalition governments leave much to be desired. Too often a small faction can hold the balance of power and use that to secure objectives considered important or urgent by a small number of people but no always in the best interest of the general public.

### Effort to be elected:

Since 1903 about 800 British Columbians have been successful in their quest for a seat in the legislative assembly of our province. An examination of those chosen to take their place as a representative of those within their constituency shows a record of community involvement, elected or otherwise, for the most part. Traditionally, among the more established political parties, successful candidates must submit to a rigorous process beginning with the recruitment of supporters within the constituency organization then to the nomination meeting and from there to the election itself. Often the process may require commitment for a couple of years before the election. During that time these hopeful residents of B.C. will submit to close scrutiny by their peers the media and ultimately the voter. Only those with a desire to serve all of the people in the riding are most often successful. The process soon eliminates those that might be involved as a lark or a sudden impulse. While not infallible it is a good test to determine sincerity and commitment of candidates.

### Provincial political mythology:

#### Most provincial political leaders are lawyers:

We have had 33 Premiers in our history. Less than 10% practiced law.

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In a democratic society it is important to avoid either the tyranny of the majority or the tyranny of the minority. Population numbers provide the Greater Vancouver area with the majority of seats in any provincial legislature. That population and its power should be restricted to the greater Vancouver area. Any residual voter's preference should not

find its way into outlying constituencies where the preference of residents may not be consistent with those within a major metropolitan area.

It is important for residents to have a sense of community and control over the results of an election within their riding. The determination of a representative should be in the hands of the voters within their electoral boundaries. British Columbia is made up of communities, large or small, and the attitudes vary greater depending upon their choice of location. Do not impose an outside influence on our choice of choosing our representative.

There always will be those that choose to march to the beat of their own drummer. Just because these extreme attitudes exist does mean we should be subjected to their inclusion as part of our government system. Our tradition suggests minority points of view and extreme attitudes often can find a place within established political parties. Should others choose to believe only they have the answers then they are destined to be apart and for the most part alone. That's life.

Some jurisdictions have opted for different methods of choosing their representatives for a myriad of reasons over time. Their experiences are relative to their needs but not to the needs of British Columbia. Our system has served us well for more than a century. Those that participated in the political world of our province over those years were not without knowledge and wisdom.

### **The perfect system of electing members to the B.C. legislature:**

**There isn't one.**

Citizens of British Columbia have been choosing their representatives for the most part over 133 years by permitting the candidate with the greatest support in a riding to represent the residents in Victoria.

The system was adopted from our federal system of choosing MPs and before than the traditional method of elected members in the United Kingdom. Over the centuries many minds have considered the process and while a multitude of changes have occurred relating to the details of the election laws the concept of having a winner as chosen by the people within a geographical area has remained constant.

Would a system that incorporates the requirement of a majority of votes cast in a riding before a candidate is said to be elected improve our system? We have experienced the results of such an experiment under the alternative voting system method in 1952 and again in 1953.

These were the results.

**1952 general election with alternative voting system.**

Results: 48 seats (minority government)

- 4 members elected with majority on first count.
- 40 members leading on first count and finishing first on final count.
- 4 members second on first count to first on final count.
- 4 changes from first count to final.

**1953 General Election results using alternative voting system.**

Results: 48 seats: (majority government)

- 5 members elected with majority on first count.
- 38 members leading on first count and winning on final count.
- 4 members second on first count to winning on final count.
- 1 member third on first count to winning on final count.
- 5 changes from first count to final.

**Provincial political mythology:**

**B.C. is subjected to constant swings of the political spectrum alternating between left and right or right and left.**

Since 1903 B.C. has seen periods of political stability indicative of voter satisfaction with the government of the day.

1903-1916	Conservatives	13 years	
1916-1928	Liberals	12 years	(minority-1924)
1928-1933	Conservatives	5 years	
1933-1945	Liberals	12 years	(minority-1941)
1945-1952	Coalition	7 years	
1952-1972	Social Credit	20 years	(minority-1952)
1972-1975	NDP	3 years	
1975-1991	Social Credit	16 years	
1991-2001	NDP	10 years	
2001-	Liberal	-0-	

If we are to maintain confidence in our system and government then the people of the province must accept the election results. There will always be those wishing to keep the political wars on fire between elections and they have the right so to do. It is important that citizens of B.C., potential investors to our province and those with whom the province does business including the public service have a period of time during which there is stability and predictability. When an election campaign is over it should be over and the chosen government must get on with the job.

British Columbians have permitted their governments to decide most issues of the day. Our concept of responsible government empowers those elected to govern with the authority of the people as provided to members chosen in general elections or by-elections.

Seldom has it been believed necessary to go to the people by way of a plebiscite or referendum but B.C. does have a short history in this exercise.

(For information only:

- 1873: voters were asked if they favored increasing the indemnity of MLAs from 5 dollars to 7 dollars per day. The voters said no.
- 1909: voters were asked if they wished the right to say yea or nay, in their own town city or district, to the licensed liquor traffic. Those who voted said yes but the numbers did not represent a majority of eligible voters so they government of the day said the plebiscite failed.
- 1916: voters were asked if legislation enacting prohibition should come into force. A majority, including the military vote, said yes. The government deleted the military vote after an enquiry.
- 1916: voters were asked if legislation should be enacted to extend the electoral franchise to women. 68% said yes.
- 1920: voters were asked if the prohibition act should be replaced with government liquor control. 62% said yes.
- 1937: voters were asked if they were in favour of a comprehensive health insurance plan progressively applied. 58% said yes.
- 1952: voters were asked if they were in favor of the sale of liquor and wine by the glass. 60% said yes.
- 1952: voters were asked if they were favour of daylight savings time. 56% said yes.
- 1991: voters were asked if they favoured a system of recall of MLAs between elections. 74% said yes.

## **Provincial political mythology:**

**When there is a change in government there is wholesale changes to previous legislation.**

Most governments introduce about 200 bills during one term of office. Upon being replaced by a new administration it is most common to have about 6 to 10 significant pieces of legislation replaced, eliminated or heavily amended.

Examples: (modern times)

### **Premier W.A.C. Bennett (Social Credit)**

Major actions included the two-river policy for Peace River Power. Included takeover of B.C. electric to form B.C. Hydro. Takeover of Black Ball Ferries to form B.C. ferries. Neither of these major policies was reversed by new government.

### **Premier Dave Barrett (NDP):**

Two significant pieces of legislation were the creation of ICBC and the agricultural land reserves. The subsequent government did not eliminate either.

The difference between governments in B.C. has been mainly administrative skills rather than political attitudes. We have experienced excellence in administration at times and visited the other end of the spectrum on occasion. Perhaps that is why governments are known as administrations.

Successful governments are made up of people with emotion, commitment and desire. Personalities play an important role in providing leadership and success. Any system to choose our representatives that is simply an actuarial exercise would result in indifferent administration devoid of vision, courage and accountability and would be unable to relate to the desires of individual British Columbians.

Disclaimer:

All preparation including statistics and numbers has been prepared by a fallible researcher. Any errors however incidental are the responsibility of the writer.

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