

PRESENTATION SUMMARY

KELOWNA PUBLIC HEARING
DATED 24 JUNE 2004
AT THE COAST CAPRI 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.

Jim Neilsen

DESCRIPTION OF PRESENTATION

A presentation in support of the current system.

KEY THEMES

Mr. Neilsen discussed the history of elections in British Columbia in order to demonstrate that over 133 years of governance BC has enjoyed the benefit of both excellent government and at other times, poor performance. Mr. Neilsen stated that the political system in BC has been wrongly depicted as rife with dissent and polarization. The presenter argued that the key question is whether or not our procedure of selecting members of the legislature best suits the needs of our province. According to Mr. Neilsen, proportional representation does not constitute a more democratic method of electing MLA's than the current FPTP system. In fact, the presenter argued that PR systems have emerged as a result of compromises reached to appease traditional pockets of power however the results have been anything but stability or progress. In addition, Mr. Neilsen stated that the use of PR has resulted in the entrenchment of many politicians in the legislature, as even if their support base shrinks they are assured reelection because the party controls the list nominations. Mr. Neilson argued that the introduction of proportional representation would provide small segments of society with influence inconsistent with their political base, potentially leading to governmental and economic instability. The presenter stated that the introduction of PR would result in the election of "back-door" MLAs, elected because their name is on a party list rather than as a result of direct endorsement by the electorate.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Mr. Neilsen advocated the retention of FPTP as it has served BC well for more than a century, and it enables clear lines of accountability between voters and representatives. According to Mr. Neilson, under FPTP MLAs must work to provide the best decisions and policies for all the people, not just those few in their political organization. The presenter argued that some change, such as the introduction of a majority run-off, may improve the electoral system. However, the introduction of PR would constitute a monumental error in judgment that would divide the people into small self-interest groups prepared to use their representation as leverage in the world of political brokering.

Quote: Our tradition has been based on a system of government and opposition with a willingness by the electorate to accept a winner and the knowledge should the winners fail to perform they can be replaced at the next election.

QUESTIONS, ANSWERS AND COMMENTS FROM THE PANEL

Q Are you advocating staying with FPTP or would you like to see some minor changes to the system?

A One of the problems we have is that the courts have interfered in the electoral process. They have ruled that we must move toward equalizing the size of the electorates. I would be in support of retaining some of the historical ridings of British Columbia regardless of the population. I would advocate the introduction of a majority run-off system, rather than the introduction of the alternative vote as we had that system in this province in the 1950s and it was immensely confusing for voters. I support our current electoral system as it is far easier to corrupt a political party than it is to corrupt elected members as we don't know who runs the political party as they are in the shadows but the elected members are up front.