

PRESENTATION SUMMARY

LANGLEY PUBLIC HEARING
DATED 20 MAY 2004
AT THE HAMPTON INN

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.

Benno Friesen

DESCRIPTION OF PRESENTATION

I think it would be a mistake to move towards the notion of proportional representation.

KEY THEMES

Mr. Friesen discussed the need of the Citizens' Assembly to find a way to combat voter apathy and argued that this is unlikely to occur via change to the electoral system. According to Mr. Friesen apathy stems from the belief that parties, politicians, and governments are all the same, or that they are ruled by self-interest. Mr. Friesen argued that this perception has arisen as the result of the adversarial nature of politics today which is effective in polarizing and alienating the voting public. Given the nature of public scrutiny, Mr. Friesen contended that many qualified individuals choose not to run for office. The presenter argued that without any reconfiguration of behaviour, a reconfiguration of the system would be irrelevant. Mr. Friesen stated that if a PR system was adopted the legislature may actually become less democratic as minorities that are unable to garner enough support for policies within major parties may splinter off and make demands for concessions, potentially resulting in back-room deals.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Mr. Friesen recommended that the Assembly spend time forming a body that has the disinterested means of elevating the debate and behaviour of party officials, elected and non-elected, so that the electorate can look to them with pride rather than anger.

QUESTIONS, ANSWERS AND COMMENTS FROM THE PANEL

Q How do you foresee achieving your objective?

A With great difficulty. But I think this is an issue that we really have to wrestle with. The example of South Africa, in its extreme embedded polarization, provides a case in which a wise statesman such as Nelson Mandela, by establishing the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, attempted to deal with the troubles of the nation. Unfortunately, politics today has been reduced to an "I can do this", rather than an "I ought to do this" mentality.

Q You seem to favour keeping the system as it is; are you concerned that 15% of the voters voting do not get any representation in the House?

A I enjoyed Mr. Anderson's presentation as it addressed the needs of disenfranchised groups. But are they disenfranchised as a result of the system, or because of something they did themselves? I say keep the current system, and clean it up.

Q To my knowledge shifting to PR in other countries has resulted in increased voter turnout; why do you feel that British Columbians would be any different?

A It might result in increased turnout, but the countries to which you refer, when did they introduce the system? In the European systems to my knowledge it was after World War Two and the social milieu there created the need for a pressure valve and the result was the emergence of PR. My concern with PR is that in some cases it can be less democratic than the current system, particularly if the party controls the list and you don't know who your candidate is going to be.