

PRESENTATION SUMMARY

NANAIMO PUBLIC HEARING DATED
27 MAY 2004 AT COAST BASTION 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.

Katherine Gordon

DESCRIPTION OF PRESENTATION

The experience of the transition from 'First Past the Post' to Mixed Member Proportional representation in New Zealand three elections ago. This submission will be in support of a change to that system.

KEY THEMES

Katherine Gordon shared her experience of the advantages and disadvantages of both the FPP and MMP electoral systems in New Zealand. She described the merits of FPP as including regional representation, and the election of majority governments, while she listed the flaws of the system as being the creation of a two-party system with no voice for minority parties, the tendency for one party to hold power for long periods of time, the lack of effective opposition and consequent complacency on part of government, and the production of false majorities. Ms Gordon described the push for change as being similar in New Zealand and British Columbia. She explained that the New Zealand experience of electoral system change has shown that it takes time to “shake out the wrinkles in the system.” Early difficulties with the system included a large number of inexperienced politicians in Parliament, the long time taken to form the first coalition government, the perception of list members as second class representatives, and problems with list members defecting from their parties and sitting as independents. Even with these difficulties, Ms Gordon believes that MMP is vastly preferable to FPP. Early problems with the system have now been resolved, for example while it took several weeks to form a coalition government following the first MMP election, the coalition formed following the third election took only 24 hours to form. There has been more political debate and as a consequence voters are more informed and find politics more interesting. The passage of legislation has slowed down considerably and minor parties have exerted considerable influence over policy. The representation of Maori, the indigenous people of New Zealand, has also improved.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Katherine Gordon recommended the introduction of MMP in British Columbia.

Quote: “MMP makes the voter’s voice count because the voter gets exactly what he or she asked for. The experience in New Zealand has shown it to be a system that has greater benefits for the constituency than the FPP system.”

QUESTIONS, ANSWERS AND COMMENTS FROM THE PANEL

There were three members of the panel who sought clarification on elements of the presentation.

Q	In your written submission I notice you deal with technical problems and people crossing the floor, and you mention this loophole has now been closed. How did
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	that happen?
A	The problem was not MPs crossing the floor, but list members resigning from their parties and sitting as independents. Now if a list MP leaves their party they must resign their seat, and it goes to the next person on the party list.
Q	How do you feel about coalitions and consensual minority governments?
A	The three governments under MMP in New Zealand have all provided minor parties with a lot of influence. The select committee process has become much more meaningful and debate has become more widespread.
Q	Do you prefer open or closed lists?
A	I'm only familiar with the New Zealand system, which uses a closed list. List selection and publication has been a rigorous process, so it's very clear to you as a voter who is likely to be representing you in Parliament via the list.
Q	You mentioned the slowness of legislation and the fact that this can be a good thing, but how does this affect matters of urgency?
A	My experience has been that in emergencies parties are capable of working quickly, for example during war in Iraq. But it also means that urgency is not abused. It is interesting to compare this to Canada, where you can see the capacity for an opposition to slow down legislation, so delay can be a part of any system.
Q	Why do you think the New Zealand experience would be relevant for British Columbia when they are very different places?
A	I disagree. I think that New Zealand and British Columbia are very similar. They have a similar size of population, a natural resource based economy, similar population density with one major metropolitan centre, and similar aboriginal issues.
Q	In terms of the five per cent electoral threshold in New Zealand, do you think the threshold should be different for different systems?
A	I think there needs to be a minimum of some kind to keep the electoral process disciplined. If not a five per

	cent threshold then perhaps one seat.
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Comment from panel: There were no further comments from the panel.

QUESTIONS, ANSWERS AND COMMENTS FROM THE AUDIENCE

Following this presentation quite a few members of the audience had questions.

Q	Are the political difficulties experienced here the same as in New Zealand? I'm concerned about candidates being required to vote according to the party line. Does MMP address this issue?
A	That is an issue in any electoral system and it really depends on caucus management. There is currently a controversial issue in New Zealand over foreshore ownership, and at least three members of government have crossed floor so that is still possible.
Q	What attention did the media give to the process in New Zealand compared to here?
A	You're asking someone who doesn't have a TV so I'm not sure what the media coverage is like here, but media coverage in New Zealand was huge.
Q	You mentioned a turf war between elected representatives and list representatives. Is that creating a significant problem?
A	I wouldn't describe it as significant – it's more of a personality issue. Having a list MP based in a constituency challenges the elected riding member's sense of ownership.
Q	There are also great similarities between Ireland and British Columbia, and in Ireland they use a very different PR system to the one in New Zealand. I appreciate that you're more familiar with New Zealand system but are you opposed to other systems?
A	I'm not familiar with other systems, but I will say that with MMP you get the best of both worlds in terms of local representation and proportional representation. I also like being able to split my vote.

Comment: There were no further comments from the audience.

SUBMISSION: GORDON 0234