

PRESENTATION SUMMARY

NORTH VANCOUVER PUBLIC HEARING
DATED 2 JUNE 2004
AT THE LONSDALE QUAY 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.

Tom Cornwall

DESCRIPTION OF PRESENTATION

A presentation discussing party discipline and its relevance to electoral system design. In general, the presentation will argue that party discipline is a necessary evil in BC.

KEY THEMES

Mr. Cornwall argued that party discipline exists for two reasons: to shape society and to win elections. According to Mr. Cornwall the primary problem with party discipline is that it alienates the voters as they feel that local representation is meaningless. The presenter questioned whether the electoral systems currently supported by many people will not serve to weaken party discipline. Mr. Cornwall stated that proponents of weaker party discipline argue that it will: allow for more regional input/expression; make politics less confrontational; and allow legislators to vote the will of their constituents. The presenter argued, however, these arguments are inaccurate. In particular, Mr. Cornwall argued that MLAs are more likely to vote their personal conscience, or the will of their financial backers, than the will of their constituents. According to Mr. Cornwall, as personal contact becomes more improbable with large numbers of constituents, politics becomes about campaigning, and to compete, candidates need large donors.

Mr. Cornwall stated that proportionality and weak party discipline may be incompatible, as coalition politics necessitates strong party discipline. On the other hand, proportionality can, according to Mr. Cornwall, lead to the mitigation of some of the negative effects of party discipline as certain proportional systems eliminate voter support as a determinant of where money is spent, all proportional systems lead to more ideologically cohesive parties, and proportional legislatures are more consensual and more effective at holding the executive to account. The presenter argued that party discipline serves to alienate voters, however, attempting to weaken it by changing the electoral system is unlikely to improve matters.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The presenter recommended that the Assembly not adopt a system that attempts to weaken party discipline.

QUESTIONS, ANSWERS AND COMMENTS FROM THE PANEL

- Q Which systems are you not recommending, as you stated that PR may increase party discipline?
- A I do think that the level of party discipline that a new system produces will be hard to predict. A mixed member system might weaken party

discipline as it may produce members that are elected in certain regions repeatedly.

Q A PR list system may further entrench party discipline, are you concerned about that?

A My response to that is that I don't think that party discipline could get any stronger than it already is. I don't know that it is possible for you to strengthen it any further by changing the electoral system.

QUESTIONS, ANSWERS AND COMMENTS FROM THE AUDIENCE

Q Have you considered the Swiss system at all? They always have minority government and it doesn't appear to me that they have huge party discipline, can you comment on that?

A I don't think the example carries over to Canada very well. It is the only con-federal state in the world. They don't have a federal government. I think that their political system is structured very differently and I think the Swiss are very different to British Columbians.

Q The Australian government appears to have much more stable government without FPTP; have you adequately studied the Australian system?

A I haven't discounted the Australian system. But what makes Australia different is that it has a bicameral legislature. The method of election to the lower house is disproportional and the method of election for the upper house is much more proportional giving the small parties some influence. You can't however, transplant a bicameral system to Canada.