

PRESENTATION SUMMARY

PENTICTON PUBLIC HEARING
DATED 23 JUNE 2004
AT PENTICTON LAKESIDE RESORT

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 Hoenisch

DESCRIPTION OF PRESENTATION

A presentation in support of mixed member proportional representation.

KEY THEMES

Mr. Hoenisch argued that there exists a need for the introduction of a system of proportional representation in British Columbia in order to make the legislature representative of the wishes of the electorate. The presenter stated that the current FPTP system favours two large parties which results in black and white policy-making. Mr. Hoenisch expressed the view that small parties, which are currently shut out of the system, have much to offer in representing the vast grey area.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Mr. Hoenisch advocated the introduction of a system of MMP. Under this system the legislature would be reduced in size to 72 seats. 36 of these seats would be filled via the current FPTP system using single member constituencies with boundaries mirroring those of the federal system. The remaining 36 seats would be filled using proportional representation. Mr. Hoenisch supported the introduction of a 5% threshold for party representation in the legislature. Each citizen would receive two votes, one for a local MLA and one for a party list. The PR seats under this system are apportioned in a compensatory manner to ensure that the number of seats each party fills in the legislature is roughly proportional to the party vote in the electorate. Mr. Hoenisch simulated the results of the last provincial election under this system of MMP and argued that while the Liberals still would have garnered a majority of seats, the enlarged and diversified opposition would have moderated their current agenda. Furthermore, Mr. Hoenisch stated that MMP would preclude the occurrence of “wrong winners” as occurred in the election of 1996. The presenter contended that the introduction of MMP would raise the level of debate in the legislature and increase the likelihood of coalition governments, potentially enhancing relations in the chamber as parties would always have to be thinking about possible coalition partners in the future. Mr. Hoenisch also argued that a major benefit of MMP lies in the provision of two votes, which allows individuals to vote for their favourite candidate and their preferred party, which may not necessarily coincide. Finally, the presenter stated that MMP would make every vote count and combat voter apathy.

Quote: Proportional representation has many benefits ... but the most important fundamental benefit is that the people of BC will finally have a legislature that truly reflects the wishes of the voters. The tyranny of the left and of the right will be broken.

QUESTIONS, ANSWERS AND COMMENTS FROM THE PANEL

Q You reduced the number of seats to 36 for local riding candidates; is that something that you think would be sellable to all British Columbians?

A Yes I do, for several reasons. Firstly, it would reduce the cost of government which is a big issue. Secondly, I used 36 seats as there are 36 federal ridings and therefore the riding commission would only have to do one job for both federal and provincial elections. I believe that changes in technology have made these distances surmountable in the larger ridings.

Q You set your threshold at 5%, thereby excluding two minor parties in your example. Why did you not propose a threshold that was simply one over seventy two?

A The reason that I feel that we need a threshold that is higher than simply one over seventy two is that I believe that while we do want a wide range of voices in the legislature, I don't believe that we want to see 72 parties being elected. One of the things against proportional representation that people cite are the examples of Italy and Israel where they have very low thresholds and where you have parties with one or two seats to attain proportionality. I believe that that does not work and that it would lead to instability in government.

Q What do you see as the role of the list candidates under MMP and what are your views on the election of potential "zombie" candidates?

A I feel that it is more important to vote for a philosophy that you feel comfortable with rather than a particular person. You need people from specific geographical areas that understand the particular concerns, and that's why we have MMP, but when I vote for a certain party and that party brings forth a list and certain people on that list become part of government because myself and

others voted for that party, I have no problem if that candidate is a failed candidate elsewhere, or if his name got chosen in other ways. I feel that parties would be very careful about who they put on their lists that there is genuine equity and that the regions of the province are also represented geographically. I think that parties would be very wise to carefully construct their list and I think that MLAs that are elected via the list should have the same rights and responsibilities as members that were elected geographically through constituencies.

QUESTIONS, ANSWERS AND COMMENTS FROM THE AUDIENCE

Q Under proportional systems the people that are voted in via the party list and get sent to represent areas do not have a clue what the area is all about and I see a problem in that and I don't know how we can avoid that problem.

A That is exactly why I'm advocating a mixed member proportional rather than a pure proportional system. Under MMP you would still have local representation and that would take care of this problem of having people parachuted in who have no links to particular areas.

Q Why did you choose the 50-50 between constituency and list seats?

A I feel that it is still important for voters to have people that understand their area, and that is why you have local representatives. I chose 36 ridings on the basis of cost as I outlined earlier. I think by having half the seats elected proportionally, that this division would allow for a very close representation of how people voted and actual representation in the legislature.

Q Do you think if we moved to MMP in BC that we would follow the Israeli model or end up more with stable coalition governments that we have seen in Germany?

A

With a 5% threshold we couldn't follow the Israeli model where they have a 1 or 2% floor. I think that we would have more stable government. Under the system I'm advocating, three parties would be represented in the legislature (using the results from the last election). Two other parties were pretty close, so unless we witnessed some huge improvements we would have five parties that would be in the ballpark; that could possibly be represented in the legislature. I believe that it is entirely reasonable to have that number of point of view represented in the legislature. I don't believe it would be too fractious, I think that it would be fairly cohesive.