

PRESENTATION SUMMARY

REVELSTOKE PUBLIC HEARING
DATED 22 JUNE 2004
AT THE COAST HILLCREST 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.

Patricia Sieber

DESCRIPTION OF PRESENTATION

A presentation in support of mixed member proportional representation in order to make our votes more a reflection of the views of the voters.

KEY THEMES

Ms. Sieber argued that the current FPTP system has become outdated, designed as it was for a simpler time in which a different concentration of power, dependent on class structures, was viewed as acceptable. The presenter stated that immigration and the extension of the franchise has created a diverse population in British Columbia that possess a number of views that are unable to be represented via the current electoral system. According to Ms. Sieber, the population no longer accepts that power belongs to a select few and the sharing of control constitutes the foundation of democracy. Ms. Sieber stated that the most often cited concern she encountered during her time collecting signatures on behalf of the Proportional Representative Initiative of 2002 was the fear that the power of the government would be weakened. The presenter argued that perhaps this was not necessarily a bad thing as governments with large majorities are able to ignore dissenting voices simply on the grounds that they possess the power to do so. Ms. Sieber discussed the weakened state of local representation, as power is often concentrated in the cabinet and local members often become spokespersons for the government, telling constituents the views of the executive rather than taking the views of the riding back to government. In addition the presenter stated that accountability is compromised under FPTP as voters are only able to influence the government once every four or five years, a process which leads to wide ideological swings and polarized politics. Finally, Ms. Sieber argued that FPTP allows majority governments to ignore the recommendations of Royal Commissions and other commissions of inquiry and instead enables them to act as if they have a mandate from the people, often precipitating wild swings in policy between governments.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The presenter advocated the adoption of a system of MMP, under which electors could vote for a local representative and also vote for a party potentially enabling power to be shared more fairly. Ms. Sieber proposed a system of MMP in which two-thirds of members would be elected locally in single member districts with the remaining one-third being elected via a PR list. The PR list would be ranked by the party but open to the preferences of voters. Under this system candidates would be permitted to run for both the local district and on the party list. In addition, the system would contain a 5% threshold for members to gain representation via the party list. There may also be a requirement that parties would need to nominate candidates in a minimum number of ridings in order to be eligible to place party lists on the

ballot. These safeguards should serve to discourage the emergence of fringe parties and keep the number of parties represented in the legislature to a manageable number.

Ms. Sieber argued that the introduction of such a system of MMP would make governments more accountable between elections as they would have to discuss and negotiate terms of legislation, thereby facilitating compromise and consensus. The presenter acknowledged that this system may produce minority governments, but argued that this may be advantageous as such governments would have to learn to share power and the pace of change would be lessened. According to Ms. Sieber, if laws are passed that are favourable to a broader range of people there would be less likelihood that the policies would be reversed when elections caused a change in government.

Quote: It really is no wonder that so many voters do not participate in the process. When people feel they have no power to affect change they tend to become apathetic. The avenues we have set up to give a voice to the public become dead end streets because of our winner take all system.

QUESTIONS, ANSWERS AND COMMENTS FROM THE PANEL

Q Why did you decide to retain FPTP for the election of local MLAs?

A I suggested keeping it that way because it is so familiar and it is less complicated than ranking candidates or getting involved in run-off elections. And while two-thirds is still a lot of seats to be elected that way I feel that having one-third of seats elected via PR gives more balance and allows enough representation for those parties who did not have an opportunity to be elected under FPTP.

Q What do you see as the disadvantage of STV under which voters can choose between candidates and attain proportionality?

A I think that as a voter that ranking candidates would lead to more complicated issues. We might end up having to have run-offs. It also has the disadvantage of disenfranchising those parties that may only receive 10% of the vote. We could still be disenfranchising numerous minor parties by using STV. My aim is to open up the system so we have

the voice of more than just the two main parties. Many of the abuses in our system come from this concentration of power.

QUESTIONS, ANSWERS AND COMMENTS FROM THE AUDIENCE

Q I see a problem with representation as there aren't enough seats, if you have three of four people representing a party and one gets elected, what happens to the other ones? Why don't they still maintain an office without a seat in parliament?

A Those individuals would have no power. They could take their views to the elected representative but that representative is not bound to act. If there is a significant number of dissenting views then the government will have to listen that and learn how to compromise and this is the main value that I see in having representatives of the parties. Under FPTP the voices of the other party candidates disappear if they don't win and this may be fine if there were only two views in society, but often times there are a greater range of views, but currently the government has no obligation to listen to anyone other than their own MLAs and often only their own cabinet ministers. If the representation was more widespread then they would have to learn to compromise.

Q You advocate a threshold of 5% of the vote, but my concern is that 5% is quite low and may lead to the emergence of extremist parties as in Israel. You mentioned a mechanism to have more than 5% in several ridings, is that what you are suggesting?

A I didn't give a specific number but I did say that to qualify for party list seats you could say that parties would have to run in a half or a quarter of the local ridings, for example, so that the party is more than just a fringe. The research that Adrienne Carr did suggests that 5% seems to be a floor that ensures that a party has a reasonably broad base of support, not just a small pocket here or there. As I understand it Israel and Italy do not use thresholds.

SUBMISSION: YES