

PRESENTATION SUMMARY

SALT SPRING ISLAND PUBLIC HEARING
DATED 19 JUNE 2004 AT LIONS' HALL

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.

Jennifer Burgis

DESCRIPTION OF PRESENTATION

The underlying values of an alternative system must be the central focus of Assembly deliberations. Some factors critical for the political health of democracy will be presented.

KEY THEMES

Jennifer Burgis discussed the four values highlighted by the Law Commission of Canada as important criteria for evaluating electoral systems: fairness, representation, equality, and accountability. She analysed the extent to which the current electoral system fulfills these criteria in BC. She argued that the domination of the Lower Mainland means that other regions are not fairly represented, particularly when measured against their importance for resource productivity in the province. She explained that women, First Nations and ethnic minorities, the disabled and the poor are generally absent from the legislature. In terms of equality, she argued that only voters who vote for the winning party feel empowered by the current electoral system, and that only two political parties are consistently represented in the legislature. She criticized the current system for its lack of accountability, and argued that the invisibility of the legislative committee structure and the limited debate in the legislature has meant that governments are only held accountable on election day.

Ms Burgis argued that British Columbia needs an electoral system that provides more voice for the regions of the province, elects a more diverse range of social groups to the legislature, and makes all voters feel equally empowered in terms of their vote making an impact. She also recommended a system of Town Hall meetings and open reporting of Legislative Committees to improve government accountability in BC. Ms Burgis discussed the Scottish experience of the introduction of MMP, where it had been expected that party lists would lead to more women and people from minority ethnic groups being elected to the Scottish Parliament but instead party lists have been used as a vehicle to make sure that senior party candidates are re-elected even if they are not capable of winning in the constituencies. She argued that closed lists have not improved representation and equality, and therefore supported the use of open lists to provide for more inclusiveness and better democracy. She also explained that list MPs have no real constituency role despite Scotland using regional lists rather than national lists. For this reason, Jennifer Burgis recommended using a more proportional province-wide list, rather than smaller regional lists.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Jennifer Burgis recommended that MMP in BC should include open, province-wide lists.

Quote: "The concept of reform must be grounded in the values of society. It is necessary to ensure that all voices present in society are present in the values of electoral reform."

QUESTIONS, ANSWERS AND COMMENTS FROM THE PANEL

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

Q	Would you appreciate an open list system? Also, would you recommend a public education system to help voters adjust to this?
A	I think the dilemma of a closed list is that it leaves the decision on the selection of list candidates to political parties. There is not a lot of democratic process inside political parties. The open list system gives voters the chance to prioritise individuals on the list, whereas in a closed list I think the systemic bias in politics may be reflected
Q	Are you concerned about the district size increasing for local constituencies?
A	I think the larger the district is and the lesser connection between an individual and their representative increases that sense of isolation and alienation of the individual from the person who is supposed to represent them.

Comment from panel There were no comments from the panel.

QUESTIONS, ANSWERS AND COMMENTS FROM THE AUDIENCE

There were no questions or comments from the audience.

SUBMISSION: NO