

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.

Ian McKinnon

DESCRIPTION OF PRESENTATION

The way in which political parties interact with and respond to electoral systems. Perspectives on how different electoral systems cause changes in the power and functioning of political parties.

KEY THEMES

Having an extensive background working with political parties, Ian McKinnon asked the members of the Assembly to consider the impact of any proposed electoral reform on the behaviour of parties and the functioning of governments. He advised the Assembly to consider the relative independence and power of individual candidates and local party associations versus the power and authority of the central party organization and its officials. Mr McKinnon also advised the Assembly to consider the degree to which the formation of a government, choosing cabinet ministers and policy deal making is perceived to flow directly from the election results versus situations where those processes are seen by the public to be the product of back-room deals negotiated between parties.

Mr McKinnon discussed the difference between the local constituency focus of the First Past the Post system, developed before the existence of modern political parties, and the central party focus of proportional representation systems, or the PR component in mixed systems. He argued that in PR systems, particularly those with closed lists, the power to determine who will and will not be elected from a party lists more with the party apparatus and insiders than with constituencies and voters. In contrast, FPTP as practiced in Canada has been characterized by looser central party control over the choice of candidates, the potential for the election of MPs not associated with specific parties, and local nomination processes open to what some view as abuse of the process. Mr McKinnon urged the Assembly to consider the consequence of repeated minority governments, warning that the Westminster system does not cope very well with minority governments and that the electorate can become frustrated with frequent elections. He argued that in Westminster systems, minority government tend to result in ongoing and intense back-room deals as parties try to gain advantage from their positions and avoid recurring elections, and that pivotal small parties may exercise power that is disproportionate to their level of public support.

Mr McKinnon suggested that if the Assembly recommends an electoral system much like the current one that it is important to set standards and rules for nominations which encourage local independence from central party control and discourage ‘packing’ nomination meetings, particularly by instant party members. If the Assembly recommends a more proportional electoral system, Mr MacKinnon recommended that local, democratic input into selection and ordering of party lists be encouraged, at that party lists be open rather than closed. He also advised the Assembly to consider how electoral systems would work with our Westminster-style parliamentary government. He urged that Assembly to make recommendations beyond its mandate on any element of the operation of government that may compromise the functioning of a new electoral system. He concluded his presentation by endorsing Professor Bryon Schwartz’s “PR Light” proposal, because it has the virtue of moving toward greater representativeness while minimizing the impact of unintended consequences and keeping open the possibility of future change.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Ian McKinnon recommended the introduction of 'Proportional Representation Light' in British Columbia, as proposed by Professor Bryon Schwartz.

Quote: "Given the current frustration with the political process, especially with the ways in which parties work, it seems vital to consider how different electoral systems influence party and legislative behaviour."

QUESTIONS, ANSWERS AND COMMENTS FROM THE PANEL

One member of the panel who clarified on elements of the presentation.

Q	Could you clarify what you mean by PR Light?
A	Only 15-20 per cent of seats in the legislature would be elected using PR, rather than 50 per cent as in some of the MMP systems. It wouldn't be fully proportional but it would give smaller parties some representation in the legislature. It could be a first step toward future reform.

Comment from panel There were no comments from the panel.

QUESTIONS, ANSWERS AND COMMENTS FROM THE AUDIENCE

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

Q	Given the Assembly's mandate, do you think they can really change candidate selection processes?
A	I think that it's very important that Assembly members comment on this element of the system. It's an area that does not get a lot of academic attention but I think it's a crucial part of our system. We need to look at the relationship between the central party apparatus, the local organization and the citizens.
Q	If you use a step by step system, where we go to step two or three later down the road, who holds the power to decide when we go to step two?
A	That could be something that the Assembly deals with in its recommendation – that we introduce PR Light as part of a

	transition phase and that if things go well we move to step two after a particular period of time.
Q	How do you suggest we increase voter turnout, especially for the referendum?
A	To increase turnout I think it's important that the referendum is held at the same time as something else important such as a municipal election. People will look to reference groups who come out for and against the system. But I think it's important that the Assembly makes their recommendation intellectually accessible and easy to understand.
Q	How do we increase the involvement of young people, and the representation of young people?
A	One of the benefits of a list system is that parties can use the opportunity to make sure that the candidates on the list are balanced.

Comment: “It’s critically important that information about this is written in plain language.”

SUBMISSION: YES

SUBMISSION ID# TO FOLLOW