

Submission
to the Citizens' Assembly of British Columbia

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Subject: A representative voting system to elect
the Legislative Assembly of British Columbia

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Stephen Todd

I am the secretary of the Wellington branch of the Electoral Reform Coalition (but this submission is a private submission, submitted on my own behalf). I have been in the forefront of the campaign over the last ten years to have STV legislated for as an option for use in local elections in New Zealand. I wrote two enabling bills, in 1994 and 1999, both of which were introduced into parliament (in 1995 and 2001).

Partly as a result of my advocacy, STV is now an option for local elections in New Zealand (see www.stv.govt.nz). I was also instrumental in getting the computer-compatible variation of STV known as Meek's method chosen as the version of STV to be used in public elections in NZ.

Ten local councils (including the Wellington and Dunedin City Councils) will use STV to elect its members later this year. (The three-week postal voting period ends on Saturday, 9 October.) It will also be used to elect at-large the seven elected members (out of up to eleven) of the country's 21 district health boards at the same time. In other words, all 2.7 million electors in NZ will have the opportunity to vote in an STV election this year.

1. Introduction

Quote

The propriety and justice of the principle that a representative assembly should, as far as its numbers will permit, accurately express the chief varieties of thought and opinion which are found in the aggregate body it professes to represent, are so obvious that one is surprised that it does not command the immediate consent of every candid mind.

Thomas Hare (STV pioneer), 1860

1.1 I advocate the single transferable vote (STV) electoral system as the system I believe the Citizens' Assembly (CA) should choose to go forward to the proposed referendum in May, 2005. In this regard, my comments, below, may be read in conjunction with the submissions received from Nick Loenen (No. 0035) and Anthony Tuffin (No. 0116), both of which I wholeheartedly support.

1.2 The basic purpose of elections is to link power with consent, by means of votes and seats. That means the electoral system being used should ensure that seats reflect votes and that votes reflect consent.

1.3 In a representative democracy the concept of "consent" should pertain to more than simply which **political party** (or parties) attains power; it should also pertain to which **people** exercise that power. I contend that only the STV system enables the people to cast a vote that will enable their full and informed consent to be accurately reflected in the election outcome.

2. Why STV?

2.1 STV is a form of proportional representation (PR) under which electors choose their representatives from a number of candidates in multimember districts. It is a voting system that enables almost all voters to obtain **equal** and **effective** representation.

2.2 It is reasonable to assert that a valid electoral system should be able to—

- (a) Ascertain the electors' wishes and, as far as possible, give effect to them;
- (b) Ensure that as many as possible of those who take part have an effect, and an equal effect, on the result;
- (c) Ensure that nearly all electors can identify among those elected a representative of their choice whom they helped to elect; and
- (d) Obtain, as far as practicable, fair and proportional representation of whatever views, opinions and judgements motivate electors when they vote.

2.3 In addition to fully complying with the objectives of a valid method of election, set out above, STV is the only alternative election method that could be used for LA elections that meets the four key democratic objectives for a representative voting system. They are—

Proportionality

Representation of significant opinion groups, of whatever persuasion, should be in proportion to their electoral support.

Accountability

The elected representatives should be collectively and individually responsible to the voters.

Equal value of votes

The value of the individual vote should not be distorted by factors such as geography or socio-economic grouping, and the number of ineffective votes should be kept to a minimum.

Effective choice

Voters should be offered as wide a choice as is practicable between and within opinion groups, and between individual candidates, towards the formation of an effective council.

2.4 While readily conceding that **no** electoral system is perfect, STV best meets these key objectives when taken as a whole.

2.5 Furthermore, STV is a far superior system to other systems of PR, such as MMP/AMS (as used in Germany and New Zealand/Scotland and Wales, respectively). The main reasons for this assertion are—

- (a) STV allows electors to vote for individual candidates rather than political parties (unlike with the Party vote under MMP):
- (b) STV allows electors to make choices between candidates of the same party:
- (c) STV gives broadly proportional results, not just by party, but by any other criteria that motivates a significant number of electors when they vote:
- (d) STV eliminates the need for tactical voting and ensures as many votes as possible contribute to the election outcome:

(e) STV strengthens the link between elected representatives and those they represent. With STV, more electors will have an MLA for whom they voted, or at least of their preferred party. Their links with such MLAs will be stronger than their links with an MLA whose election they opposed:

(f) STV enables the election of (genuinely) independent candidates. (Of 166 TDs in the Irish parliament, 13 are independents, most of whom were elected [at the general election on 17 May 2002] on local issues such as health services.)

2.6 The STV system **does** have its detractors, however. In this regard, a number of objections are raised that I wish to defend the system against.

3. Increased workload for MLAs

3.1 It is possible that, initially, people might “shop around”, writing to several MLAs in their multi-seat riding about their “problem”, in the hope that one of them gives them the answer they want. More likely, however, is that workload might increase because people are more likely to approach an MLA for help, because, of the several choices of MLA that will be available to them, there will be at least one whom the constituent will feel will be sympathetic to their concerns. They might then approach that MLA, whereas under FPP, they might not have bothered, because their (sole) MLA was seen as being of the “other political stripe”.

3.2 The argument goes that MLAs may then feel obliged to respond to all approaches, quickly and fully, so as to ensure that they are seen as representing the peoples’ interests, which will hold them in good stead at the next election. This is then said to cause them to spend too much time on constituents’ problems, at the expense of the “problems of state”.

3.3 First, this objection to STV has some support in Ireland (especially among Fianna Fáil MPs, who want to be rid of STV) where politics is “local”, and where about half of all Dáil members are also local councillors, or made their name in local government before entering national politics. All indications are, however, that this aspect of Irish politics is peculiar to Ireland. There is nothing that I know of, for example, that suggests that constituency work is a problem in Tasmania, where STV has been used to elect the Tasmanian Legislative Assembly since 1909.

3.4 Second, it should not be overlooked that in the 21st century, elected representatives have modern communications systems, and transport, available to them. More importantly, though, Irish TDs, MPs in the UK, Canada, Australia and New Zealand, and no doubt MLAs in BC, all have large numbers of staff in their offices to field/handle enquiries. In this day and age, our elected representatives want for nothing when it comes to logistical support.

3.5 The adoption of STV to elect BC MLAs will greatly enhance their responsiveness to the people who elected them, without causing that aspect of their duties to dominate all others.

4. Representation not evenly spread

4.1 Another objection to STV is that if, say, five ridings were to be amalgamated into one five-seat riding, the successful candidates might end up all being resident in just two or three parts of the riding, rather than being evenly spread across the entire riding.

4.2 That fear overlooks the fact that, in voting under STV, different electors will attach different weight to several criteria simultaneously. For example, gender, ethnicity, political persuasion, etc. will be of overriding importance to some; the residential locality of the candidates, to others. STV gives proportional representation of this opinion structure of the electorate with an accuracy dependent only on the number of representatives simultaneously elected. When allowed to operate properly, STV gives freedom of choice to electors and ensures, as far as possible, that that choice is satisfied and not distorted or frustrated.

4.3 Therefore, such a scenario could only happen if the overwhelming majority of electors in an amalgamated riding abandoned the candidates from particular (single seat) ridings in favour of the candidates from the other (single seat) ridings. In real life, that is never going to happen. People vote for what they know, or feel comfortable with. The electors will vote for those candidates whom they consider will best represent them in the Legislative Assembly (LA), and well over 80% of all electors will be represented in the LA by someone they helped to elect.

4.4 In fact, the adoption of STV would significantly enhance the representation of the various communities of interest in the province. That will be the case because STV is a proportional representation (PR) voting system. That means the electors of (say) Penticton cannot be denied their representation by the greater number of electors in Kelowna (if Penticton electors, collectively, wish to retain that representation), because, in a five-seat “Okanagan” riding they comprise about 20% of the population in a riding where the electoral quota would be 16.7% of valid votes cast.

4.5 People who express concern about the loss of guaranteed local representation are only **assuming** that that is the sole, or at least the main, criterion that motivates electors when they vote. But, are all the electors who voted for unsuccessful candidates in the last Assembly elections happy with their current representatives? Are they really happier to continue to be represented by someone they choose not to support (for whatever reason), than to have the chance to help elect someone else (even in a neighbouring riding) whose views they agree with?

4.6 Under the structure proposed by Nick Loenen, about 85% of electors in the multi-seat ridings (and about 82% overall) would be represented in the LA by at least one MLA that they had helped to elect. Many thousands of electors will be more than happy to vote for a candidate of the party they support, even if that candidate lives in a neighbouring (former single seat) riding, if it means they get to cast an effective vote.

5. Publicity costs and canvassing efforts

5.1 Under the current First-Past-the-Post system, the theory is, that candidates who are serious about getting elected have no choice but to campaign widely, because, not knowing how many votes they need, they must attempt to extract a vote from as many electors as possible. This is not the case with STV.

5.2 In STV elections, candidates need only attain a quota of votes in order to be elected. The approximate number of votes that comprise a quota, in any given multi-seat riding, will be known beforehand. Candidates will quickly realise there is no point in thrashing themselves, physically and financially, chasing after two, or even three, quotas of votes (only for their surpluses to be transferred to help elect other candidates, at their expense) when, to be elected, they only need **one** quota of votes.

5.3 In a five-seat riding, the quota is 16.67% of valid votes cast. An incumbent MLA (or any candidate, for that matter) who lives in Kelowna, for example, would not have to campaign in Penticton (unless he or she wanted to, of course) to ensure his or her (re-)election. Campaigning in and around Kelowna would, in all likelihood, be all that is necessary.

5.4 Candidates do not have to spend more money getting elected under STV in multi-seat ridings. They need only campaign as they would under FPP, or as part of their party's team in the expanded riding, knowing that they no longer need to receive about 40% or more of the votes, to ensure they receive more votes than any other candidate; they need only receive a quota of votes.

6. Too many candidates

6.1 Another objection to STV is that there will be too many candidates standing for election in each multi-seat riding, which will be too confusing for the electors.

6.2 If, however, we are to find out what the wishes of the electors are, and, as far as possible, give effect to them, there needs to be a wide choice of candidates and an electoral system that will enable a high proportion of votes to be effective in helping to elect a representative. That is exactly what STV will provide.

6.3 It is quite possible that, in some of the larger multi-seat ridings, there will perhaps be as many as 30 candidates standing. Such numbers will not be a problem, though, provided that, as is the case with NZ STV and the Northern Ireland rules, electors are free to rank-order as many, or as few, candidates as they like. In that case, all that would be necessary for a vote to be valid is for the number '1' to be placed beside the name of one candidate.

6.4 The *Directions to Voter* (or BC equivalent) would also likely include an explanation along the following lines—

You should continue to express preferences **only** as long as you are able to place successive candidates in order. You may express as many or as few preferences as you wish. You **do not** have to include **all** the candidates in your preference list if you do not wish to do so.

6.5 In other words, electors need only consider candidates they know something about, and can safely ignore the rest. Nothing could be simpler.

7. Concluding comments

7.1 STV is the only electoral system that was rationally designed with the deliberate intention of ensuring maximum range of choice for electors and effectiveness for their votes.

7.2 If STV is adopted in BC, voter choice will be enhanced, a more diverse group of MLAs will be elected, all significant political parties and therefore all significant opinions in the province will be fairly and effectively represented, and the ability of the dominant cabinet faction to dominate the legislature will be significantly reduced. This latter claim is very real, because STV is the most “voter-responsive” electoral system in use in public elections. MLAs would ignore voter opinion (even if their party’s view on a particular issue is contrary to public opinion) at their peril.

7.3 I recommend STV for British Columbia.