

SUMMARY OF SUBMISSION

This submission:

- Supports the introduction of a mixed member proportional (MMP) representation electoral system in British Columbia;
- Summarises the presenter's experience as a New Zealand voter living under both "first past the post" (FPTP) and MMP, and the transition from one system to the other; and
- Recommends a provincial referendum to ask for voter approval of a change to an MMP system.

NZ HISTORY

It is assumed that the assembly has had access to resources available to understand the changes that have occurred in New Zealand. If not, I suggest a review of www.electionresources.org/nz, which contains an excellent summary of the changeover to MMP and the relevant statistics.

The first election held under MMP was in 1996, and there have been two subsequent elections. Prior to that NZ had utilized a FPTP system for over eighty years.

MERITS AND FLAWS OF FPTP

Merits:

- Clearly preferred regional representation in individual ridings;
- In general, clear majority governments are also easily formed.

Flaws:

- Effectively FPTP results in a two-party system – elections become competitions between the two parties with the greatest resources (usually, one on the centre left and one on the centre right), minority votes are effectively "lost" and minority parties are unable to secure seats;
- One party also tends to dominate for long periods of time. In New Zealand, for example, the conservative National Party held power for decades punctuated by sporadic and short bursts of power held by the Labour Party;
- Regularly the dominance is so strong that it results in no effective opposition;
- This leads to complacency on the part of the dominant government;
- It also results in a lack of debate in the House; and
- On occasion, the governing party which has won the most seats has actually only secured a minority of votes. This occurs because of the imbalance and size in population and area of urban and rural ridings.

STIMULUS FOR CHANGE IN NEW ZEALAND

In New Zealand, research into alternatives was driven by the high level of voter dissatisfaction with the FPTP system. The actual impetus to change was, of course, political will. Committed political will is crucial to see through a change.

The research was begun in 1985: by the time voters were asked in 1992 in a non-binding referendum if they wanted to change the electoral system. Voter turnout was high: 55%. The vote was 84.7% in favour of a change to the system. MMP was given a 70.5% approval rating as the choice of alternative system.

When a binding referendum was held one year later, voter turnout was 85%, and 54% voted in favour of MMP, which then came into effect for the 1996 election.

HOW DOES MMP WORK?

By way of a very simplistic explanation:

- All voters get two votes, one for a local candidate in their riding and one for a party;
- The local candidate with the greatest number of candidate votes in his or her riding wins the seat;
- There are a fixed number of such local seats – 69, including 4 dedicated Maori seats;
- There are 120 seats in the House altogether;
- The remaining seats are filled by “list” candidates. These are people on a pre-election set list for each party. Each elected party can “top up” its seats in the House from people on the list in order to ensure it has the proportional representation in the House that its party vote indicates it should have.
- To qualify, a party must win at least one seat or receive 5% or more of the party vote.

EXPERIENCES IN NEW ZEALAND

On the downside:

Over three electoral terms a number of things have “shaken down.” It must be expected that wrinkles will require ironing out. For example:

- There will, at least initially, be more inexperienced members in the House;
- The spread of the vote has resulted on all three occasions in the need to negotiate coalition governments;
- List members have no home riding to represent. In one sense, they are sometimes seen as “second-class” members because they are not specifically elected;
- Tensions and “turf wars” can occur between the elected member in a riding and a list member resident in the same riding;
- Technical problems can arise. For example, fairly quickly several list members defected from their parties but declared an intention to continue sitting as independents – a nonsense notion given they hold their seats in the first place by virtue of their party affiliation. (This loophole has now been closed.)

On the upside:

The merits of MMP appear to vastly outweigh any downsides, which are relatively straightforward to deal with:

- Over three electoral terms, experience has come and many of the initial stumbling blocks have been removed or overcome (inexperience on the part of new members may not be a bad thing – they won't have as many bad habits);

- Because the traditional style of parliamentary debate is retained, there are already rules and a structure in place to govern such inexperience (for example, the Speaker);
- As to coalition negotiations, experience has made this process faster and more amenable to compromise as time has progressed (in New Zealand, after the first election, the negotiations took days and ended in a result not expected by most voters; by the time of the last election, experience had resulted in extensive pre-election negotiations that smoothed the way to a speedy and practical resumption of government immediately following the election);
- When it comes to “turf wars” in ridings between list and elected members, from a voter perspective, this is fine – regionally, it means they have not one voice in the House, but often two or more, all working to keep each other honest;
- Debate is a great deal more extensive. There is more flexibility between parties to negotiate sound compromises that serve the public better. Standing committee processes become more representative instead of being “patsy” processes simply funnelling legislation through, and minority parties are able to have a substantial influence on government policy and represent their constituencies effectively. For example, the Green Party in New Zealand (which holds 9 seats) has managed to achieve substantial progress on bio-security and GM foods. Prior to MMP, it could not even win one seat and was unable to be influential in any manner;
- Debate is also slowed down significantly. This is a good thing! Significant legislation cannot be simply rushed through the House.
- Finally, and perhaps most importantly: voters get the truly representative legislature they deserve.

IN SUMMARY:

MMP makes the voter's voice count – because the voter gets exactly what he or she asked for. The experience in New Zealand has shown it to be a system that has greater benefits for the constituency than the FPTP system. As the function of government is to serve its constituency, I submit it is imperative to call for a change to this system in British Columbia as soon as a referendum can be held.

Writer bio:

The writer of this submission is a Canadian citizen, a freelance journalist and author, and is not affiliated to any political party. Prior to moving to British Columbia, she has lived and voted in New Zealand over the course of 8 elections.