

## **Why British Columbia Should Adopt the Single Transferable Vote (STV)**

### **Abstract**

The First-Past-The-Post electoral system has consistently failed to provide British Columbia with representative government. The current system should be replaced with a form of proportional representation. The two most widely supported options for replacing FPTP in British Columbia are MMP (Mixed Member Proportional System) and STV (the Single Transferable Vote). STV is the better of the two systems.

### **The Problem**

For the past fifty years the First-Past-The-Post system has been used as the electoral system of British Columbia. During this period it has consistently failed to provide representative majority government. For over three decades from 1953 onwards the Social Credit Party enjoyed virtually uninterrupted power at provincial level by winning a majority of seats in a succession of elections at which it won only a minority of the popular vote. In 1996 the New Democratic Party won a majority of seats in the Legislative Assembly though it obtained fewer votes than the Liberal Party. In 2001 the Liberals won all but three of the seats in the legislature with 58% of the vote and the Green party with 12% failed to win a single seat.

### **The Solution**

The replacement of FPTP with a system of proportional representation would make the Legislative Assembly more representative of the people of British Columbia and prevent problems of the kind outlined above.

### **Which System of Proportional Representation?**

The Mixed Member Proportional System (MMP) which as well as being used in New Zealand is also used in Germany, Scotland and Wales, has gained a great number of spontaneous and enthusiastic endorsements as a replacement electoral system for British Columbia. However, though a vast improvement on the current system, MMP is not the best replacement available. The best replacement system is, in my opinion, the Single Transferable Vote (STV).

### **STV and MMP Compared**

#### **Two Classes of Member**

Under MMP approximately half the members are elected from single member ridings and half from party lists as top-up members to ensure a proportional result. One problem with this is that it creates two different types of member -those with ridings and those without. All of the direct members are likely to be members of the major parties with minor

parties only having list representation. Contrast this with the situation under STV in which all members represent multi-member geographical ridings.

### **Fixed Lists**

The use of fixed lists under MMP on which the parties decide the order of candidates gives party machines too much power over which individuals are elected. For example unpopular or unknown candidates could be “smuggled” into office “hidden” in party lists. If a voter wishes to defeat an individual candidate he or she dislikes on a party list the only option available to them is to vote against the entire list. The voter under MMP has no power to express a preference as to which individual candidates of a party she/he would like to see elected.

### **Single Member Ridings**

The use of single member ridings under MMP is often presented as an advantage of the system. I have never understood the arguments for this. Take the following situation as an example. You approach the member who represents your riding with a problem you would like help with or an issue about which you feel deeply. Your direct riding member disagrees with you on this issue- you are stuck. It would be much better if you had a number of direct members representing a range of opinion -at least one of them is likely to be sympathetic to your point of view.

Another problem with single member direct ridings is that, as under FPTP, members are likely to only represent a minority of the electorate in a riding. Also since a party will only nominate a single candidate in each riding voters will have in effect no choice over which member of a party will represent them.

### **Proportionality is Solely Considered in Terms of Party**

MMP in common with all proportional systems based on party lists considers proportionality solely in terms of party. Whilst proportionality of party is important it is not the only sort of proportionality. I would strongly argue that proportionality of opinion is also important. For a example if a voter wishes to vote for candidates on the basis of issues that cross party lines this is impossible under a system that uses fixed lists as a basis for determining proportionality.

### **Independents**

It is difficult for independent candidates to win seats under MMP. For the direct seats they have the same very low chance of election that they have under FPTP. For the list seats independent candidates have virtually no chance of victory.

## **STV- A Candidate Based Proportional System**

The major advantage STV has over all other proportional systems is that as a candidate based system it gives the maximum power and choice to the individual voter. Since STV would be conducted in multi-member ridings parties would need to nominate a number of candidates in each riding thereby providing voters with a choice as to which individual candidates from a party they wish to represent them. If one of the candidates of a voter's preferred party is disliked by the voter she/he has the freedom under STV to not vote for that particular candidate. In an STV election if all voters vote entirely on the basis of party allegiance STV will give seats in proportion to party strength. Voters can under STV, if they wish, vote for candidates on the basis of criteria other than party to give proportionality on the basis of issues the voters consider important rather than merely on the basis of narrow party allegiance. STV as system encourages representatives to give a good level of service to and be responsive to the voters who elect them. Representatives who fail to represent the interests of local people can under STV be defeated by other candidates of their own party. Contrast this with the MMP system where a member disliked locally can be given a high position on a party list and still win a list seat despite being defeated locally in his or her riding.

## **Voting in an STV Election is Complicated**

A common criticism of STV is that casting a preferential ballot is too complicated a task for people to understand. This is simply not true. Preferential voting is currently used in Ireland, Australia and has in the past been used in Canada with no apparent problems. Another criticism made of the use of preferential ballots in British Columbia is that using one system at federal level (marking ballot papers with X's) and another preferential system at provincial level will lead to confusion and an increase in spoiled and invalid ballot papers. Since 1973 Northern Ireland has used preferential voting for local and European elections and voting with X's for elections to the House of Commons with no apparent difficulties. Also it is worth noting that British Columbia itself used preferential ballots for single-member seats in 1952 and 1953 whilst using the current voting system for elections to the Federal Parliament.

## **Counting an STV Election is Very Complicated**

It is often said that the STV counting procedure is very slow, extremely complicated and that a computer is required to conduct the count in a reasonable amount of time. STV was first used for elections in Ireland in the 1920's long before computers were invented. The fractional transfer Newland-Britton system has been used with hand counting in Northern Ireland for over 30 years with no significant problems.

## **Conclusion**

The First-Past-The-Post system has consistently failed to provide British Columbia with representative government. The current system should be replaced with a system of proportional representation. Whilst MMP would undoubtedly be a great improvement on

the current system STV is the best alternative system available. The major advantages of STV over MMP is that it takes power away from party machines and gives it to individual voters providing them with the greatest possible degree of choice in selecting the individual men and women who will represent them.