Creating the Ideal Relationship Between Citizens and MLAs

A Proposal to the British Columbia Citizens' Assembly

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The Center for Collaborative Democracy was founded to promote consensus on divisive issues. We develop new processes for resolving political conflict.

Can British Columbia Have It All?

"Interactive representation" (IR) is a proportional election system in which:

- Each voter gets a local representative on his or her own part of the political spectrum, a representative more aligned with the voter than under any other method.
- Each representative is directly accountable to his or her voters and reports to them regularly.
- To report as much progress as possible, each representative strives to reach agreements with politicians from other camps.

Interactive representation would, in effect, make politics less adversarial than other election methods. IR would, in fact, achieve all of the Citizens' Assembly's stated goals more fully than other approaches can.

Overview

What might be the ideal relationship between MLAs and voters?

What if every British Columbian could point to some member of the BC Legislature and say: "I trust that person to speak for me on the important issues. He or she truly represents my values. He or she champions the causes that matter most to me. And he keeps me informed about what he's doing in the Legislature."

With that kind of relationship to their MLA, most citizens would likely feel empowered, truly invested in the political process.

How would that relationship affect MLAs? If each one had constituents who *all* shared his or her political agenda and he reported to them often, each MLA would want to report progress. The only practical way to have good news to report would be to work with MLAs from other political camps.

If that sounds too optimistic, just consider other situations in which representatives for opposing groups meet face-to-face. For instance, whenever a dispute erupts over publicly owned land in British Columbia, the government brings together representatives for all the groups that will be affected: environmentalists, developers, logging companies, First Nations, fisheries, and local communities in that particular region. In short, a potentially explosive mix of representatives. Yet, they often reach *unanimous* agreements.

How does that happen?

Each of these representatives — for the environmentalists, logging companies, and so on — speaks for a group of people who share a set of interests or set of values. Each representative knows what the people in his or her camp want. He knows that to move their agenda forward, he has to sit down with their adversaries and negotiate a deal. Each representative also knows that his constituents think about the issue much the same way he does, so if he strikes a deal that makes sense to him, he can sell it to people in his camp.

Imagine, then, if each MLA had a similar relationship with his or her voters, all of them backing his or her political agenda. They would be counting on him to advance their cause. If he wanted to do his constituents any good, if he wanted to do *himself* any good, he would need to make progress on the platform that he and his constituents shared.

To make any progress in a Legislature where his party was just one of several, he would need to sit down with both his political allies and his adversaries. They would need to figure out solutions that gave each side what it needed most. Then, each MLA could explain to his or her constituents how the deals he had made would advance their cause more than other alternatives would.

Practical Application

To create this substantive relationship between MLAs and citizens, what kind of elections would we need?

We can get our arms around that task most easily if we shrink it down in size. Imagine a very small town that wants to form a town council in which each member is connected to his or her constituents as strongly as possible. For that purpose, the whole town meets in a large hall. Each person who wants to be on the town council hands out copies of his or her platform. The crowd questions the candidates. When that's over, the person running the meeting asks each candidate to move to a different point in the room. The moderator then asks every other person present to gather around their favorite candidate. When everyone has gotten to their first choice, the moderator turns to the candidate with the smallest group around him and says: "Joe, since you have the fewest backers, I'm going to ask you to drop out of the race. Then, would you and each of the five people gathered around you please make a second choice." When each of those six people get to their second choices, the moderator turns to the next candidate with the fewest backers and asks her to drop out. She and each of her supporters go to their next choices. This process continues until the number of candidates left equals the number of council seats.

By this method, each person in the town would end up with a representative closer to him or her politically than he could get under any other election method.

An IR Election

Next, we need to translate this story into an election for the BC Legislature. The scenario above is in fact equivalent to using a preferential ballot to elect several MLAs (three or more) in a riding. In other words, we can get the same result as the scenario above if: Each voter gets a ballot that lists all the candidates in his or her riding. Each voter picks a first choice candidate, a second choice, and so on. When ballots are counted, the candidate picked as first choice by the fewest voters is out of the running.

The votes for that candidate go to his voters' second choices.

Then, the next lowest drawing candidate is dropped.

The votes for her go to her voters' next choices.

And so on, until the number of candidates left equals the number of MLAs in the riding.

Next, to connect each MLA with his or her constituents as strongly as possible, we need two more steps.

First, each MLA needs to stay in regular contact with the people who elected him, so he can explain to them everything he does in office. For that purpose, a day after the election, every voter is mailed a card that lists the election winners. Each voter is asked (but not required) to check off the name of the person they want to represent them and, then, mail the card to that representative. Each MLA thus gets his or her constituents' names and addresses. He can then send them regular reports about what he does in the Legislature.

Second, we need to tweak this election process to account for the fact that each winner will end up with a different number of voters. In the small town scenario, for instance — after the people who backed the least popular candidates moved to other choices — one council member could end up with 50 people supporting him, another could have 35, another 25. So, each representative should get voting power on the council equal to the number of citizens who voted for him. This arrangement, while unusual, is necessary to create a meaningful relationship between each representative and his or her constituents. That is, if each citizen is to get the ideal representative, each representative will inevitably draw a different number of voters.

To recap, the Citizens' Assembly can come as close as practical to creating an ideal relationship between MLAs and citizens by recommending the following election process:

- 1) form ridings with at least three MLAs in each;
- 2) use a preferential ballot;
- 3) when counting ballots, eliminate the least popular candidates one by one;
- 4) create a direct line of communication between each MLA and his or her constituents;
- 5) give each MLA voting power in proportion to the number of his or her voters.

If the BC Legislature were elected in this way:

Every citizen would get a local representative closer to him or her politically than in other systems. Every citizen's vote would count.

Each MLA would be directly accountable to his or her voters.

Each MLA would thus want to resolve political differences with the rest of the Legislature.

Frequently Asked Questions

Isn't it idealistic to expect members of all political parties to cooperate?

In an IR environment, MLAs would work together for practical reasons. First, each candidate would be seeking voters from his or her own part of the political spectrum. As a result, during the election campaign, each candidate would compete mostly with candidates from his part of the spectrum. Therefore, candidates and MLAs would have less reason than now to attack parties ideologically distant from their own.

Second, with many candidates competing in each riding, a candidate who campaigned negatively would drive voters to other candidates. The surest way to win votes would be to offer a positive vision.

Third, and perhaps most important, since each MLA could communicate directly with his or her constituents, the surest way to win votes at the next election would be to trumpet his achievements. From the first day in office, each MLA would look for successes to write about. And each one would achieve many more successes by negotiating with ideological opponents than by verbally abusing them.

Doesn't STV create a similar relationship between MLAs and citizens?

No. While STV also uses preferential ballots, the ballots are counted very differently than with IR. With STV, the votes for the *most* popular candidates are redistributed to voters' lower choices. As a result, many citizens end up uncertain just who their representative is. Each representative, in turn, has no idea who his or her constituents are. What's more, under STV, 15 to 20 percent of voters may not have their votes counted at all. For all of these reasons, STV fails to create a strong relationship between citizens and MLAs.

With interactive representation (IR), however, each citizen knows exactly who his or her representative is, and each representative knows who his constituents are. Plus, with IR, the maximum number of citizens get their first choice of a representative. And, with IR, if a citizen ranks all the candidates, his or her vote is *guaranteed* to count.

How does IR compare to a Mixed Member Proportional system?

With MMP, each citizen is represented by several people. There is no one person that the voter can hold to account. In fact, Prof. David Farrell pointed out to the Citizens' Assembly that New Zealanders living under MMP are dissatisfied and confused about the roles of the local representatives versus the party list representatives. IR, on the other hand, creates the tightest possible linkage between each citizen and his or her one representative.

IR would in fact achieve all the goals that the Citizens' Assembly articulated in its Preliminary Statement, more so than any other approaches would.