

Summary of the written submission:

**“An in-depth analysis of the CA Preliminary Statement by Tom Varzeliotis of Alcyone News, [www.alcyonenews.ca](http://www.alcyonenews.ca) Varzeliotis”**

**THE CA “PRELIMINARY STATEMENT”**  
**A critical analysis**  
**from**  
**[www.alcyonenews.ca](http://www.alcyonenews.ca)**

**“A Camel is a horse designed by a committee”.**

Attributed to Sir Alec Issigonis, the Mini designer (Mini-Morris that is, which, in turn, inspired the Mini-Skirt).

**“Who the teacher is determines what the students will learn”** Greek proverb.

**“He has considerable experience as a facilitator who can bring people together around a common goal.”**

Jack Blaney’s CV.

**“Manufacturing consent”**

Noam Chomsky.

**“5. The Chair may summarize a consensus position and that consensus position will be deemed equivalent to a vote (of the CA members) unless a vote is requested by several members of the Citizens’ assembly.**

**6. Consensus means that in the opinion of the Chair a very clear majority of the (CA) members support or `can live with the decision.”**

Jack Blaney, CA Chair, in “Policies & Procedures - Developed by

Chair” (CA website).

## Background

The management of the Citizens Assembly organized its work into three phases. Phase I: Education; Phase II: Public hearings; and Phase III: Decision Making. This is as it was recommended to the government by Mr. Gordon Gibson. The CA has now completed Phase I.

In short, Phase I consisted of a six-weekend schooling of the CA members at what one may call the “CA School of Electoral System Maintenance and Repair”. It was held in Vancouver, starting on January 10, and ending on March 21, 2004.

Schoolmaster was Dr. Jack Blaney, faculty were Dr. Ken Carty and Dr. Campbell Sharman, assisted by invited lecturers and junior staff. The School convened on each Saturday morning with a pep talk delivered by Blaney. Then, the 160 CA members would be delivered to Carty who would give a lecture on some aspect of electoral systems. After midmorning coffee, the school would split into 14-member study groups, half men, half women, and repair to rooms to discuss under the guidance of a junior faculty member the lecture they had received. The routine would be repeated Saturday afternoon and Sunday morning, some sessions taught by Sharman or a guest lecturer. Sunday afternoon the CA members would fly home.

On completion of Phase I on March the 21<sup>st</sup>, 2004, the CA issued a “Preliminary Statement”, kind of an “interim report”. It is a modest size document of about 2,800 words, available on [www.citizensassembly.bc.ca](http://www.citizensassembly.bc.ca), the excellent CA Website.

The genesis of the Statement is obfuscated, not accidentally one presumes. My understanding is that the CA Managers crafted the document, distributed it to the CA members, who in Study Group formation, led by junior facilitators, discussed it. Cosmetic changes were allowed. Then Blaney impressed upon them all that the Statement was the members’ own and the managers’ draft was proclaimed the CA “Preliminary Statement”.

A request for specific information on the Statement genesis addressed to the CA’s Ms. Marilyn Jacobson, Director of Communications, did not produce anything more than was available on the CA website.

In the Statement, the CA invites British Columbians to consider it and comment on it, for the Assembly’s consideration. I heeded their call, the following being my response.

## Overview of the Statement

The problem with having 160 people sit down to compose a Statement is formidable but it would have been manageable, were the CA an autonomous body, as it ought to be. That is to say, if the CA was allowed to elect its own government as opposed to being put under the control of a government viceroy. To begin with, elected CA leaders could speak with some substantial authority for those who elected them. A viceroy cannot do that.

A self-governed CA would have proceeded differently than they did when led by the appointed manager. Instead of having spent the period immersed in Electoral System Schooling, as was done, the CA should have started the process by coming to terms with their mandate. They ought to debate it, interpret it, and identify any shortcomings it may have had which would handicap the CA's ability to reach its professed objective of democratizing elections. Were they to find incompatibility between the road-map and the destination, they would have had to determine a new route, for the wrong road would likely result in an odyssey rather than a safe passage to one's destination, as Ulysses discovered. Then, they could request amendments to the mandate or proceed with their own interpretation, as they deemed it appropriate. That would have been a sound departure on the voyage to electoral reform.

Citizens set in a mission think for themselves, this as contrasted to soldiers who destroy on command whoever is referred to them as "enemy" by their commanders. That is why military recruits are put through Boot Camp to be drilled into becoming what the organization wants them to be and learn to do what it wants them to do and do it as they, the Army, wants it done.

CA Phase I, as it was conducted, be it intentionally or inadvertently, was conducive to the non-elected CA managers firming their control over the CA. Since there are no physical means of imposing discipline on the CA, as is the case of politicians using the Party Whip, they had not that choice. Since they could not "whip" the CA to walk the official line, they trained them to follow it, ostensibly of their own free will. In the process they established themselves as the fountainhead of wisdom and guidance for the expedition to Electoral Reform.

Instead of seeking to understand their mission, to study the map and plot their route accordingly, the CA was brought into a classroom to be taught vote-counting. To academics education is the solution, "if it moves and breaths, educate it!" is their cry. Regrettably education rhymes with indoctrination.

In the instance of a citizens' assembly, education, no matter how objective

the curriculum may be, is destructive to its *raison d'être* in more ways than those related above. A citizens' assembly must not be processed into a learned society, or a body of experts. The CA is meant to think the way the citizenry think, they are not supposed to think like members of the Royal Astronomical Society, or the Chamber of Commerce. It is supposed to bring the unsurpassable Common Sense to bear on the power-holders within the society, those who due to their situation often "lose touch with reality". Destroying or even eroding the capacity for Common Sense, by educating, training or any other means of mind-molding, strips the citizens' assembly of its defining attribute and may reduce it to a disoriented body.

In a way, a citizen's assembly is a big jury instituted to adjudicate issues of importance in the public domain. Juries are peers of the accused on trial, they are not learned judges; jurors are people like you and me, they are not graduates of a Juror's University, indeed, they should not be.

The CA managers schooled the CA. They now refer to that schooling as the Phase I "accomplishment". In Paragraph 12 they relate: "*This intensive study has involved the mastery of complex concepts and the appreciation of relevant comparative experience through absorbing formal presentations, engaging in small group discussions, and undertaking considerable private study.*" Sad, it should never have happened....

Now, the Curriculum is the Statement. (Marshall McLuahn line). The CA "Preliminary Statement" consists, mainly, of the curriculum taught at the CA School. It is presented as being the result of CA research, processed into an intellectual arsenal for the CA members to deploy in their pending assault on the problem of electoral systems.

But, worse than that - the Statement is economical on direction and inspiration and this, unless overcome, can be lethal to democratizing the political system which burdens our society with "elected tyrants".

## Wading through the Statement.

Before going further I would like to reiterate that this analysis is of the "Preliminary Statement". As of necessity, my comments address the authors of the document and do not necessarily reflect my views on the membership of the CA.

Expressions such as "the CA learned" are spin doctor's version of "the CA School taught the CA members". That the faculty, Dr. Carty and Dr. Sharman and the guest lecturers are highly respected academics neither precludes being of some particular "school of thought", nor that they are free of infectious "convictions". Remember, schools are efficient venues for the transmission of communicable

convictions.

There is nothing really new in the Statement, absolutely nothing. One is not impressed by platitudes such as the CA "*discovered that each* (of the several electoral systems) *has its advantages and disadvantages*" which, in one or another wording, is repeated throughout the Statement - it is nothing more than re-inventing the adage "each cloud has its silver lining".

"Fence riding", is a technique popular with consensus manufacturers. They soften the self confidence of the people they target, inducing the belief that on one side is six on the other half a dozen, and otherwise make the people ride the fence. This is a highly unstable position and only a slight tip would cause one to fall on the side of the fence the perpetrators want them to fall.

We have a good example of deployment of this technique in the introduction of the Canada - USA free trade. The establishment softened the target to the level that the nation became thoroughly convinced of our ignorance on free trade. Then, for better or worse, Brian Mulroney made his move.

There are several inaccurate assertions and half-truths embedded in the Statement. Consider for example the assertion that "*membership* (in the CA) *was open to all British Columbians*" - it is as true as saying the lottery jackpot is available to all lottery ticket holders.

Another example? "*Jack Blaney was designated by a unanimous vote of the Legislative Assembly, to chair the*" CA. In fact, Blaney was handpicked by Premier Campbell and was vetted by the Legislature, a legislature consisting of 77 Liberal and two NDP MLAs. Significantly, Premier Campbell has denied Official Opposition status and the associated research resources to that lonely pair of NDP MLAs.

Ironically, Blaney's mission, one would say, is to reform the Electoral System so that it no longer yields elected tyrants and does not reduce the peoples' parliament into an assembly of rubber-stamps, like the legislature Blaney says "designated" him.

Incidentally, in the Statement one reads that membership selection "*led to a **further** 160 citizens*" being chosen. That is to say, "further" to Blaney. I, for one take it as sloppy writing rather than manifesting thoughts akin to those of Louis XIV. (L' Etat, c'est moi!)

The document in question is clearly the prose of "scholars", certainly not the writing of "intellectuals". In the manner of Humpty Dumpty, ("when I use a word it means what I chose it to mean - neither more nor less") I should clarify the meaning I attach to these words:

Scholars study - intellectuals think. Scholars, learn whatever is available to be learned and write books with extensive footnotes - intellectuals ponder the unknown. Scholars produce anthologies of poetry - intellectuals write poems. Scholars walk the beaten path - intellectuals blaze trails through the bush seeking encounter with the unknown. Scholars have disciplined minds - intellectuals have unruly minds, promiscuous minds prone to be impregnated with ideas. Scholars record civilization in history tomes - intellectuals give birth to civilization.

Sadly, the Statement is intellectually sterile. The CA managers subjected the CA to regurgitation of "a wide range of *alternative electoral systems and studied their impact on other democracies*", they state. But this will not inspire people to think the "unthinkable" and reach for the "untenable". There is no direction toward the summit, no quest for an electoral system to shine in the world, to become the ideal of peoples around the globe. If anything, it would make us "users", but is this what we really want? I am not alone in the belief that we are a dynamic society, a creative society, a society with a vivid mind, capable of innovation, capable of excellence.

After six weekends of intense "education" at the CA School, the CA members have been made, to some degree, extensions of their teachers. This is not to say that the CA members have become clones of Carty and Sharman, yet, their minds are pregnant with the brainchild of their tutors. The CA managers are fully aware of it, as evidenced by embedding in the Statement what they taught at the CA School and then presenting it as being the thinking of the CA members. Look at that picture adorning the Statement: Six CA members, three of each sex, hanging securely on the lips of Dr. Carty taking in, one presumes, what found its way into the Statement. It rivals the RCA classic "His Master's Voice."

The Statement asserts that the CA members have not made up their minds on what they will recommend to the government. Yet, one is left wondering how much citizens' submissions may influence the outcome of the CA enterprise. One especially worries about the fate of submissions at variance with the official line. For it is those that really matter, the bold and new, the ideas born to those who may bring change to a world resenting change (Karl Sundberg). For it is not realistic to believe that ordinary citizens, not being communication experts, would, in the 10 or 20 minutes allotted them at public hearings, dislodge from the minds of the CA members the stuff Carty and Sharman, the seasoned teachers, have implanted therein over a six weekend period. A mind made up is often impermeable.

Then one becomes apprehensive of the declaration that the CA members deliberately refrained from making up their minds. Is this possible? Is it reasonable to believe that anyone can "deliberately" hold back from forming an opinion during six weeks of schooling?

The "criteria" given the CA members will likely determine, to a great extent, the verdict they will deliver, even if they would take in what will be presented at the public hearings and through the "written submissions" venue. Consider, for example, the criterion pounded into the CA members, the one suggesting a reformed electoral system should provide for "government stability". Could the mind recover and consider objectively this aspect of electoral systems? Would the CA members assess fairly, for example, the proposition: "Government stability resulting from the electoral system is the tap root of "elected tyranny."

Then, the authors of the document in question repeatedly inform us that the CA members are "convinced" that this or that is good or bad. How receptive to public input can those individuals possibly be, after being "convinced" beforehand about something? That is to say, if we were to believe the authors of the Statement, who assert in it that the Members are "convinced".

Then there are more serious omissions in that Preliminary Statement. I am not talking of inadvertent omissions, I mean omissions carrying through from the "education" purveyed at the CA School. For example, there is no substantive discussion of election financing. Is it conceivable that democracy can "flourish", as the Statement attest it does in our society, while the political parties, and through these all politicians, are bankrolled by magabusiness and megalabour? Is it conceivable that a democracy may "flourish" while politicians cannot enter parliament unless monied interests buy them "tickets"? Could the consequences of this bankrolling be averted by improving the vote-counting?

Most worrisome is the lack of inspiration, the absence of direction to bigger and better things, the failure to heed Aristotle's "Aien Aristevain" (forever seek to excel).

I expected the CA to make its purpose to stimulate creativity, to make people think of electoral systems. To challenge us all to come up with something new, something the like of which the world had not seen, something people from around the world would come to desire for themselves. I did not see the CA as being to patch up the broken and dated system we are burdened with, I do not want the CA to fit a steam engine into that old wagon - I want the CA to make a rocket with which to propel democracy onto our modern times.

If patchwork was the goal, we would not need a citizens assembly to do it; a committee of Poli-Sci U-Profes would have done the job efficiently. They know the market well and they would give us a good tour to window shop, if we were after ready-mades. The CA could take us on a flight to excellence - I hope they will.

Such omissions and substitutions were not for the lack of warning either. I for

one forewarned the CA about **the futility in fixing the barn door but leaving the barn roof with gaping holes**. In Alcyone News I discussed the issues and outlined for their consideration means to stimulate public creativity and input into the process so as to realize the best we can do. Only to be stonewalled, to be beaten back from the forum by CA managers hostile to such views and concepts.

It hurts to see an opportunity such as the CA wasted. It makes malcontents like me cry, as we see the dream of excellence reduced to the convenience of politicians.

## Sampling the Statement - three dozen times and one

- I. Specificity Deficit (Joe Clark, Paul Martin lines, merged)
  - \* *"The Assembly constitutes a representative group of non-elected British Columbia citizens."* Para 5
2. Very nice of them...
  - \* *"Assembly members will participate in public hearings"* Para 7.
3. You had no choice, really...
  - \* *"We have organized public hearings...."* Para 1.
4. Enough times said... we believe you
  - \* *"We look forward to hearing the views of all British Columbians."*
5. Well... not really...
  - \* Membership in the CA *"was open to **all** British Columbians..."* Para 4
6. It will be a long process...
  - \* The CA *"... eagerly looks forward to hearing the views of **all** British Columbians."* Para 1
7. Try to say that at a jury selection session *after six weekends of CA schooling*
  - \* *"the Assembly has not come to any conclusion ... In fact we have deliberately refrained from doing so."* Para 2.



- 8 How long can you hold it back in class?
- \* *"... In fact we have deliberately refrained from doing so."* Para 2.
9. I am Adrienne Clarkson and you are not! (CBC - Double Exposure)
- \* *"We invite comments on this as well as on features of electoral systems which **we feel** merit further discussion and debate."* Para 1.
10. We are no longer like you, we are savants and you are not
- \* *"This intensive study has involved the mastery of complex concepts and the appreciation of relevant comparative experience through absorbing formal presentations, engaging in small group discussions and undertaking considerable private study of advanced political science literature..."* Para 12
11. We fabricate yardsticks
- \* *"Assessing the comparative merits of different systems is neither easy nor straightforward but assembly members identified several criteria to use as benchmarks."* Para 13.
12. Not the whole truth...
- \* *"Jack Blaney was designated by a unanimous vote of the Legislative Assembly."* Para 4.
13. A picture worth many words
- \* Photo of Prof Carty instructing six CA members, embedded in the Statement.
14. Worth reporting?
- \* The CA has now *"an appreciation of the fact that there is no such thing as a perfect system."* Para 6
15. Wheeling & Dealing
- \* *"All electoral systems involve trade-offs among desirable elements"* Para 6 and others

16. And we thought it was a means to assembling a parliament...
- \* An electoral *"system must reflect the values and aspirations of the community that will use it."* Para 6.
17. A "set"?
- \* The CA members *"can draft a **set of final recommendations** for their fellow British Columbians".* Para 8.
18. A Single?
- \* The CA *"...either endorse the current system or propose a **specific alternative.**"* Para 8
19. Pat on the back
- \* The CA members *"worked hard to learn about the way our political system works and then to study five different families of electoral systems."* Para 10
20. Unguarded moments in ghost writing....
- \* *"The members of the CA..."*,
  - \* *"We...."*
21. Brian Mulroney, Glen Clark, Bill Vander Zaalm, Gordon Campbell....
- \* The current electoral system, *"has much to recommend it... has served us well... we have a flourishing democracy in which voters hold politicians and governments accountable..."* Para 15.
22. The Current Electoral System, in its Majesty, empowers all MLAs equally, irrespective of whether they sit in the cabinet, on the back benches, with the governing party, or across the aisle... (Anatole France line)
- \* Under the current electoral system *"All MLAs have equal standing in the legislature..."* Para 17

23. If this is the silver lining, try if you can, to imagine what lurks on the other, the dark side...
- \* The current electoral system *"promotes the creation of majority governments that can claim an electoral mandate. These governments have a security of tenure that allows them to plan confidently for the life of the Legislative Assembly and to implement their programs as they see fit."* Para 18.
24. Oh, the convenience of mighty power...
- \* *"The current system promotes the creation of majority governments that **can claim** an electoral mandate."* Para 18
25. Pedagogy
- \* *"Elections generally revolve on the issue of choice of government."* Para18, bottom line.
26. Legalizing subversion....
- \* Keeping on the menu the current system after discovering that it fosters *"government domination of the Legislature."* Para 21.
27. No big deal...
- \* The system in force requires MLAs *"to put party interests above those of their constituencies..."* Para 21.
28. Hearing varied Masters' Voices, one presumes
- \* *"newly elected governments often undo or reverse the programs of their predecessors."* Para 22.
29. Window Shopping for ready-mades
- \* The CA *"considered a wide range of alternative electoral systems and studied their impacts on other democracies."* Par 23.
30. Keeping a mind open, like a functioning parachute, will take you down.
- \* *"... the Assembly is **convinced** that any alternative system it considers **must** reflect the **values it believes** are central to the political health of the provinces democracy."* Par 23

31. We know what you believe, but we will defend your right to say it.
- \* *"Citizens believe....." Par 24.*
32. To recover the \$400M spent on the BC Ferry PussifiCats and the \$150M spent on "Sponsorshipping".....
- \* *Under the current system, MLAs are "rooted in specific geographic areas, it is possible for voters to hold them directly accountable for their performance..."*
33. More than what? More than nothing! (Jacques Prevert line)
- \* *"The assembly is interested in considering electoral systems whose features help ensure that elected representatives are **more** responsive to the concerns and views of their constituents."*
34. Motherhood in 34 Words
- \* *"The Assembly believes it is important that the outcome of an election, in terms of the distribution of seats in the legislature, should reflect the expressed intentions of citizens as expressed in their votes."  
Para 28*
35. Assembly Learned vs Profs Taught
- \* *"Beyond an **acceptance** of this basic principle, the assembly has **learned** that ....." Par 29.*
36. A tear for "elected tyranny"
- \* *"The Assembly is aware that proportional electoral systems are likely to end the dominance of one-party majority governments and lead to a more consensual, or at least coalitional, style of politics in which opposition and small party MLAs have an opportunity to play a greater role in the government of the province." Para 30*
37. To be original...
- \* *"There are a number of possible proportional systems..... the Assembly believes that many of these offer rich possibilities..." Para 32*

Selected by Tom Varzeliotis.