SUBMISSION TO THE CITIZENS' ASSEMBLY
ON ELECTORAL REFORM

INTRODUCTION

I support the Assembly's effort to consider a new and better voting system for B.C. Our present system has much to recommend it, but some modifications or a major change could greatly improve the governance of British Columbia.

I am first going to present my values as they relate to a voting system. Then I will discuss those priorities one by one in more detail, and describe my proposed voting system and how it attempts to meet those values.

My first value would be local representation and accountability. Here I would pretty much echo the wording in the Assembly's Preliminary Statement. The second value would be that the government should be chosen from that party which wins the most ridings. Thirdly, there should be familiarity, simplicity and transparent counting.

Fourthly, the voter should have the freedom to vote for that party and/or candidate which most closely mirrors his or her political views, and freedom from having to choose between strategic voting and voting for the party they like the most. Finally, a new voting system should provide greater opportunity for smaller parties to elect candidates, and thereby to have their voices heard in the legislature and to grow over time.

LOCAL REPRESENTATION AND ACCOUNTABILITY

For me, local representation and accountability are a very strong priority. This value is well described in the Assembly's Preliminary Statement. I will quote just two sentences: "Citizens believe it is important that the interests of their particular communities be represented in public debate and policy-making. This is accomplished when MLAs have an intimate knowledge of the communities they represent and the concerns of the people in them."

This is a strength of the current system. I am opposed to any change which would decrease this member-constituency tie, and that is one reason I do not favour a proportional representation system. Even with our current system members are far too greatly influenced by the party, especially the governing party, and I am concerned that members elected from a list, any kind of list, would be even more dominated by the party.

VOTING SYSTEM

The voting system which I favour is a ranked ballot, but with the voter able to indicate only his or her top two preferences. There would therefore be only a maximum of two counts. In each riding, if one candidate won at least 50% + 1 of the votes on the first count (i.e., the count of first preferences), that candidate would be declared elected. Otherwise, all candidates except the top two would be removed from the count, the second preference votes from the dropped candidates would be allocated to the remaining two as appropriate, and the candidate with the most first and second preference votes would be the winner.

In the Assembly's materials, this system has also been referred to as an alternative vote, and the ballot called a preferential ballot. I believe it would also be valid to call it a single transferable vote (STV). It would not be STV in the service of PR, but I think STV nevertheless. Successful candidates would be able to claim they had won with a majority.

This system is similar to that used to elect the French National Assembly, except that in that case citizens in many constituencies will have to go to the ballot box twice. It has also been used in Canada to elect party leaders (e.g., the recent Conservative Party of Canada leadership race), except that in those elections more than two candidates have been allowed.

PRIORITY OF RIDINGS

How would this method support my values for a voting system? Clearly, it would maintain local representation very much as it is now. The existing riding system would be maintained, with no need to increase the size of ridings at all.

The government would continue to almost always be chosen from that party winning the most ridings, not the highest percentage of the popular vote province-wide. Why is this so important to me? I think it is partly a gut feeling based on governments having been formed this way for such a very long time. Also, I think that in a PR system the voters' recognition that it is the province-wide party vote which will determine government would weaken a little further the member-constituency tie.

This way of thinking excludes the concept of a wrong winner. Therefore I don't agree with the statement that "The 1996 BC election generated a 'wrong winner' government." The system was based on ridings, the NDP won the most ridings, hence the NDP legitimately formed government. (These thoughts are in no way a comment on the quality, good or poor, of the government so formed.)

THE BALLOT

The ballot would be changed only a little. The candidates would be listed as they are now, but there would be two columns for voters to register their choices, obviously the first column for the first preference and the second column for the second preference. The voter would mark one X in the first column and one X in the second.

This would maintain the simplicity and largely the familiarity of the ballot. It also has the advantage of keeping the present criteria for spoiled ballots, compared to a ballot requiring the voter to actually write in numbers 1, 2, 3, etc.

There would be a maximum of only two counts, thereby keeping the counting procedure relatively simple, certainly compared to say a PR-STV system. The result would be transparent to the voter, so that voters aren't likely to think they have been had by a complex counting procedure which they can't understand. The result might take two days to be known, requiring voters to exercise their patience muscle a bit more than now.

VOTER CHOICE

This system would greatly improve voter choice. For example, I suspect that in the last two elections a lot of voters would like to have voted for the Green Party than actually did. Instead, they voted strategically for the NDP, either to keep the Liberals out or, in the last election, to try to maintain a reasonable opposition. Under this system the voters would be free to vote Green as their first preference, and NDP second. I would postulate that in the last election one or two Greens would have been elected, and well more than two NDP; perhaps even one or two from the Unity Party.

BENEFITS TO SMALLER PARTIES

The results of the first preference count would be required by law to be published. This would allow voters to see the true support for each party. Let us say that in the next election, under this new system, the Greens got 20% of first preference votes and Unity 13%. Seeing that, in a subsequent election more voters might consider one or other of these parties a more viable option, giving them a greater opportunity to grow than they have now.

It is probably desirable that there be more than one party of the "right" and more than one party of the "left." This could be one consequence of adopting this system.

My primary point here is that, under this system, voting patterns would almost certainly change. It would, of course, not be really correct to take the votes from a previous election, apply this system, and conclude that that would have been the result. The benefit to smaller parties would come from people taking the opportunity to vote in a different way. Hopefully this would also lead to a reduction of the great swings between parties of widely differing policies which have become the norm in B.C.

SUMMARY

To summarize, I am recommending a system which could be called a Majority-AV system. I would highlight the fact that here "Majority" refers to each candidate requiring at least 50% + 1 of the riding vote to win — a majority government is by no means guaranteed. The variant of this system I am proposing allows the voter to register only his or her top two preferences, and therefore there would be a maximum of only two counts in each riding.

This voting system would maintain the present close tie between the citizens of a particular geographic area and their MLA. It would continue to choose government as that party winning the most ridings. It would be simple, relatively familiar, and transparent.

This system would greatly improve voters' freedom to vote for that party they most want to vote for, and reduce — not eliminate but reduce — the need for strategic voting. It would improve smaller parties' opportunity to elect candidates and, if they perform well, to increase their standing in the legislature with time. It has the advantage of being a relatively minor change, and I think gradual change is the best way to go.