Citizens Assembly on Electoral Reform   July 8,2004

Attached is a proposal for your consideration in which I attempt to address the problems as outlined in your brochure while keeping the systems that have worked so well for Canadians throughout our history.

Abstract:

"PA" - A unique solution for electoral reform that rewards good ideas with access to law making, while enhancing solid governance over our day to day affairs.

Contents:

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Please Note: – I would appreciate my e-mail address be included as part of the posted paper as I deem feedback to the source as important.

Summary

The present flawed electoral system should be modified – not abandoned to be replaced with yet another flawed system.

The current system "fosters a direct link between voters and their representatives and ensures that all areas of the province have a spokesperson in the legislature". (Citizens' Assembly on Electoral Reform). This is an extremely critical feature of any electoral system, especially for day to day governance, and most especially in a province as vast and as culturally diverse as is British Columbia. Weakening the bonds between the people and those who govern them, an inherent result with other systems, would lead to disenfranchising large segments of the province, especially in the interior. (The north east region of BC already has a quite tenuous bond with Victoria.)

"It is unfair when a party which obtains 20% of the common vote gains only 5% of the seats in the legislature." - This argument is a red herring. These results, typical in a multiparty setting, are merely a reflection of natural occurring cutoff points that are established based on the number of candidates standing for election and the vote spread across the board. The answer some would have is for the state to take control of this dynamic, citizen driven phenomena and establish fixed, artificial results based on their sense of fair play. An example of this statism, is that some would qualify a party for PR only if it obtained 5% not 4.9% of the common vote. I think it best we leave this electoral hurdle to be free and in the hands of citizens and the dynamics of a pluralistic electoral system.

This paper will describe a modification of our present electoral system that, unlike other systems, will -
  ➢ be inclusive of smaller parties by way of legislative participation
  ➢ strengthen the bond between the voter and government - not weaken it
  ➢ provide a more stable form of governance across election cycles
  ➢ improve the decision making capabilities of the government
  ➢ additionally - result in minor disruption to the voter, taxpayer, citizen - leaving the stress of change to the political side of the equation – where stress of political change rightly deserves to be.

What I am proposing is not a panacea. It does, however, provide access to power for those who now have none; without destroying the most beneficial feature of our present system – a direct citizen link to the day to day governance of this province. I refer to this modified pluralistic system as PA (Proportional Access).

Comments on this concept will be gladly accepted- rjpawley@shaw.ca

A Win – Win Solution.

I won't reiterate the negative aspects of each of the electoral systems. They are well outlined in your brochure and I am sure that you know them better than I. I will outline how the present plurality system can be modified to increase benefits to all.

Lack of Proportionality
The present plurality electoral system excludes participation of parties that don't reach a threshold of votes high enough, in any riding, to elect a member to the legislature. These are parties which are founded, primarily, on a single, to them overriding, issue which may appeal to many in a province wide poll. In most cases any broad based issues these parties do adopt are an attempt to broaden their appeal so they can gain a better shot at having their single issue count. From their perspective, as a yet small party, these adopted broader issues are a distraction of time and resources from their raison d'etre.

We can modify the present system to give more options to the voter. At the same time we can allow the smaller, emerging parties to concentrate their scarce resources on their issue of choice.

To do this we need to change the legislative laws to include the rights of "Special MLAs", to enter the legislature as, part time, fully qualified MLAs to prepare, present and vote on a single issue of their choice. To qualify as a "Special MLA" a registered political party must have failed to elect a single member under the plurality system and yet have crossed an established (1%-5%) threshold of the common provincial vote.

The party or parties who qualify will be given adequate, but established, time (2 to 6 weeks), office space, human and financial resources to learn, research, prepare, present and actively participate in the vote, in the legislature, on a single legislative proposal of their choice. This legislative access could be on an annual or term frequency and the party would be allowed to lobby and seek support for their bill among full term MLAs. If more than one party qualifies, each should have their own time "in office".

The number of party members who participate could be a direct reflection of the percentage of popular vote. With a 79 seat legislature, a party that gained 10% of the common vote will have a limit of eight members participating. (Note: under this system the small parties will have a greater number of members participating in a legislative vote for their issue than they could possibly obtain under a PR system. (The trade off when they obtain the threshold of electing a full time member to Victoria is that the member will be full time.)

Each party member who participates should receive a pro-rata personal salary and expenses, based on the equivalent remuneration paid to all MLAs. The extra costs to the provincial treasury would be minor compared to the benefits of exposing new ideas to power and assisting small parties, those with good ideas, to grow.

Government Dominated Parliaments and Impacts on Governments and Voters

I linked these categories, that were separate in your brochure, as my proposal will provide a single solution to the most egregious aspect of these issues.

It has been established, in the present administration, that we now have set elections every four years by law. Once this was accomplished, the natural next phase is easier to contemplate.

I propose we change the electoral cycle from every four years to every two years. However, to limit yo-yo politics, only half of the province's ridings (39/40) would participate in any one cycle. In other words the first election would be held in 39 ridings in which the successful candidates would serve as MLAs for a full four years. The next election, two years later, would be held in the other 40 ridings and the successful candidates would serve a full four years.

This heightened electoral frequency would -
 ➢ Stabilize government by decreasing the swings in public policy that are so prevalent when a new party takes the reins. Most of the changes by new governments happen in the first 18 months of power, under the realization that new issues always come along to mitigate voter anger. Facing an election at the height of voter anger will be unpalatable.
 ➢ Decrease party discipline, as the party in power could face the loss of that power in a mere two years, at about the time they were becoming established in that power. If I were in a riding represented by a government member who didn't listen to me I would actively work for his political opponent in the next riding making my MLA's position vulnerable - and if successful I would tell him, in no uncertain terms, why it happened. This would provide the constant voter/MLA tension that is so necessary to good, stable government.
 ➢ Bring the power of the legislature closer to the people.
 ➢ Create a situation where votes of confidence in the government will no longer be votes relegated to the legislature. With greater voting frequency, confidence votes will move outside the halls to the people – a government's ultimate authority.
 ➢ Improve the decision making dynamics of the government. Today, economic and societal changes occur at warp speed compared to the time the electoral cycle was first established. A two year electoral cycle will force more timely decisions to critical problems and ensure prompt retraction of instituted programs that do not meet common acceptance.

Keep the baby – throw out the bathwater.

An Example

Election Results
Party A – 45% 0f votes
Party B - 32% of votes
Party C – 11% of votes
Party D – 9%
Others – 4%

Plurality System – 79 seats
Party A – 52 seats
Party B – 27 seats
Party C – 0 seats
Party D – 0 seats

Mixed System – PR – 30 seats; Plurality – 49 seats
Party A – 32 seats Plurality (based on same ratio as above) + 14 seats PR; total = 46 seats
Party B – 17 seats Plurality + 10 seats PR; total = 27 seats
Party C – 0 seats Plurality; 3 seats PR; total = 3 seats
Party D – 0 seats Plurality; 3 seats PR; total = 3 seats
Totals
Party A – 46 seats
Party B – 27 seats
Party C – 3 seats
Party D - 3 seats
          79 Seats
Note 1 – in this example, due to the vagaries of mathematics, all of the seats awarded to Party D and C are taken from the party deemed most popular. The second place party emerges unscathed.
Note 2 – in this example Party A still has a majority. As far as government domination, it is clear that only the happenstance of number of parties seeking votes and the distribution of those votes will break this dominance – exactly the scenario we enjoy today.

Proportional Access
Party A – 52 seats
Party B – 27 seats
          79 Seats
Special MPs
Party C – 9 Seats
Party D - 7 Seats

When Party C makes it's appearance in the legislature there will be 88 potential votes determining their issue, 86 votes to determine the issue for Party D.