

Background

If voting could really change things, it would be illegal.

Graffiti in NY men's washroom.

In anticipation of the 2001 British Columbia election, the Liberal Party of British Columbia, led by Mr. Gordon Campbell, published their New Era Commitments (NEC), a book of promises to the electorate - a list of services they were tendering for the votes of citizens. This document was validated by the electorate in the ensuing 2001 general election thereby becoming the electoral contract between the citizenry and the government.

Accordingly, the Government of Gordon Campbell is committed to democratize the political system of British Columbia. Specifically, they undertook to legislate preset election dates, which they did, to revamp the Recall and Initiative (R&I) Act, still pending, and to do Electoral Reform, this being underway and the subject of this work.

That the Liberals made such Commitments manifests to the obvious, that the electoral system of British Columbia is in want of democratization. Implementation of these Commitments would realize the Campbell Liberal's vision, it being *to make the government of British Columbia the most open, accountable and democratic government in Canada*, as they most categorically stated. A noble aspiration, indeed.

The obligations of the government to reform the electoral system is laid out in the following "clauses" of the NEC contract:

The Liberal party, if elected into government, commits itself to:

Appoint a Citizens' Assembly on Electoral Reform to assess all possible models for electing the MLAs, including preferential ballots, proportional representation, and our current electoral system.

Give the Citizens' Assembly a mandate to hold public hearings throughout BC, and if it recommends changes to the current electoral system, that option will be put to a province-wide referendum.

These commitments acquire further dimensions, when read in conjunction with the overall vision of the Campbell Liberals and especially the following part of their preamble to that electoral contract:

Liberals will reform how government works from top to bottom, to create the most open, democratic and accountable government in Canada.

British Columbians know that our institutions need to be reformed, to ensure all MLAs are accountable first and foremost to the people who elected them. You deserve a chance to participate in that process of democratic renewal, and that's what our plan for a New Era of Public Service is all about.

Note that it is "the electoral system" to be reformed, the whole electoral system, not some parts of it. There is no limit set either to the depth or the breadth of the reform to be affected, there are no exclusions, no qualifications, it is the whole electoral system to be reformed. There is no suggestion of patchwork either, the electoral system is to be reformed, from top to bottom, as it may be necessary to achieve the objective of democratic renewal.

This is as it should be. For a chain is as strong as its weakest link. For it makes no sense to fit a high power supercharged motor into an old buggy - such a contraption will go nowhere. The electoral system is a complex multi-faceted system, each of its components complementing the others and all meshing together like the cogs of a clock, to perform their task. It makes no sense to revamp the clock face and leave the cogs, even one of them, in disrepair.

It is therefore of utmost importance that all the components of an electoral system be considered as a whole. If the system is to be reformed, each component must be examined, made good as necessary and harmonized with the others. For unless the change(s) is thorough, the Electoral System may remain as impotent as it now is, possibly ending up worse than that.

On, September 20, 2002, some 16 months after coming to power, the Campbell government took the first step toward fulfilling their obligation to do electoral reform. They appointed Mr. Gordon Gibson to write a report on constituting the Citizens' Assembly (CA) on Electoral reform.

Gibson is a highly respected person. He was once Leader of the Liberal Party of BC, adviser to the Government in Ottawa, Special Assistant to Pierre Trudeau, he is a writer. He currently labours at the Fraser Institute, but so be it. One appreciates his qualifications and on one doubts his sterling character.

It is important to note that the assignment given Gibson was not to do electoral reform, but to devise a plan for constituting the Citizens' Assembly on Electoral Reform, in fulfillment of the undertaking of the Liberal government spelled out in the New Era Commitments. In other words, Gibson was to tell the government how to implement this aspect of the electoral contract, he was to devise a roadmap for doing it, including a cost estimate for the project as well as other organizational and logistic matters.

Gibson's mandate, embedded in his Report as Appendix I, and reads, in part, as follows:

Develop a strategy for the appointment, structure and mandate of a Citizens' Assembly to fulfill government's New Era Commitments (Page 30 New Era Document) to:

** Appoint a Citizens' Assembly on Electoral Reform to assess all possible models for electing MLAs, including preferential ballots, proportional representation, and our current electoral system;*

** Give the citizens assembly a mandate to hold public hearings throughout B.C., and if it recommends changes to the current electoral system, that option will be put to a province-wide referendum."*

NB: "(Page 30 New Era Document)" is original to the document in question.

Gibson went to work and on December 23, 2002 submitted his report to Hon. Geoffrey Plant, Attorney General of B.C. While the timing appears incidental, the Report was like a Christmas present to the government, a welcomed one, I would guess.

It is a 35 page report, containing 36 Recommendations on how the government should institute the CA. Gibson recommended a 79 member CA, the members to be randomly selected from the BC

Voters' List, one CA member from each electoral district of British Columbia. And he recommended an organization structure for the CA.

The Campbell Government upped the ante, opting for a CA with twice as many members as Gibson had suggested. Furthermore, the government did not accept Gibson's denial of sexual differences and decreed that each electoral district shall be represented in the CA by one man and one woman, like it is done in heterosexual marriages. Later on, they added two more members to the CA, again one man and one woman, to represent the aboriginal people. Thus the size of the CA grew to 160. At the time of writing, it being past mid-December 2003, the members of the CA have been selected and are ready to go to work. The offices of the CA have been set up and staffed according to Gibson's blueprint.

Gibson did not contain himself to designing the CA, he proceeded beyond that. He went on to re-define, or to interpret if you prefer, the New Era Commitment in question. He outlines how to do the CA and then directs it what to do. The former was his job, the latter wasn't any of his business.

The government liked this Gibson indiscretion for it is pregnant with good optics for the government while providing for a virtual negation of this their New Era Commitment. Gibson's dictum restricts the CA into a single verdict and funnels its work into one facet of the multifaceted electoral system. These were, one suspects, music to the ears of the government.

On April 30, 2003. the government appointed a committee of MLAs to oversee the implementation of the New Era Commitment to do electoral reform. It is composed as follows:

J. Les (Governor), J. Bray, I. Chong, K. Krueger, B. Lekstram, J. MacPhail, and R. Nijjar.

At its first meeting the Committee interviewed Dr. Jack Blaney, the government nominee to chair the CA. Blaney is a former president of the Simon Fraser University in Burnaby, BC. His CV shows him an able reconciliator, and his pronouncements since appointed to lead the CA show him as persuasive, eager, enthusiastic about Electoral Reform and highly motivated to lead the CA.

Of particular interest is the Web Site of the CA. It is well designed and promises to be informative. Its address is www.citizensassembly.bc.ca.

In the next article I will discuss three of the Gibson recommendations which I find inappropriate for they, if adhered to, will result in cosmetic reform of the electoral system, just as the Dosanjh Committee work resulted a placebo Recall and Initiative Act.