# MMP Is Not The Way Forward

There is an urgent need to replace the present First-Past-The-Post (FPTP) voting system with a voting system that will give properly representative results in successive elections to the BC Legislature. This means you must move to some system of Proportional Representation (PR). All systems of PR must use multi-member constituencies, either in whole or in part. PR is impossible unless you elect several MLAs together. It is understandable that there should be concern about the effects of introducing of multi-member constituencies. Some of these "concerns" are nothing more than a smoke-screen for total opposition to any reform that would make the election results more fairly representative of the wishes of the voters. But leaving that aside, some of these concerns are real and are centred on the special link that is reputed to exist between an MLA elected from a single-member constituency and the electors living in that constituency. Surveys of electors have shown that in most cases, this alleged link is much weaker than many elected members would like us to believe. But this is a real issue, especially in those rural areas where the population density is lowest.

It is, therefore, understandable that the Mixed Member Proportional (MMP) voting system should appear attractive because it seems to offer single-member constituency representation with PR of political parties. But all is not as it seems. And MMP creates as many problems as it solves. This is not a theoretical view – it is based on practical experience of MMP here in Scotland, and in Wales.

The National Assembly of Wales is currently elected by MMP (the Mixed Member Proportional voting system, known in the UK as the Additional Member System, AMS). In March 2004 the independent Richard Commission on the Powers and Electoral Arrangements of the National assembly of Wales published its report. The Commission recommended that MMP (AMS) should be replaced by STV-PR. See:
http://www.richardcommission.gov.uk/content/template.asp?ID=/content/finalreport/index-e.asp

The Secretary of State for Scotland has recent set up a Commission on Boundary Differences and Voting Systems to look at the problems arising from the use of four different voting systems within Scotland for different levels of public election. One of the main reasons this Commission has been set up, is the widespread dissatisfaction with many aspects of the MMP (AMS) voting system currently used to elect MSPs to the Scottish Parliament. There is a very strong move to have MMP replaced with STV-PR. So why do we want to get rid of MMP, having adopted it so recently?

The most obvious problem with MMP is that it elects members of two very different kinds: those elected from the single-member constituencies and those elected from the provincial list or regional lists (the "additional" or "top-up" members). The members may appear equal when they are debating in the Legislature, but they have very different status in the eyes of the electors. They certainly have very different responsibilities with regard to local representation. In Scotland (and in New Zealand) there have been "turf wars" between Constituency MSPs and Regional MSPs over their respective roles. This is almost unavoidable, given the higher status accorded to the Constituency members, who do not want intruders "on their patch". Unlike the Constituency members, the List members are free to "cherry pick" the issues they

wish to deal with. To the annoyance of the local Constituency member, the List members nearly always establish an office in the constituency they hope to win next time as a Constituency member. The successful Constituency MSP can often find the second-placed loser elected to the opposition benches. In some cases, third and fourth-placed losers have been elected as well.

In an attempt to reduce this problem, it has been suggested that candidates should not be allowed to stand for election both in a constituency and on a regional list. (If they win the constituency, they take the constituency seat and are passed over on their party's list in the allocation of list seats.) But practical politics dictates that candidates do stand for both. No party will risk seeing its leader not elected if there is any risk he or she might not win a constituency. Better by far that the leader is elected as a list member than the leader is not elected at all.

This unavoidable problem of electing two different types of member is made worse by the way MMP works in practice. If one party is locally popular it is likely to win its proportionate share of the seats as constituency seats. Then all the list members will not only be elected in a different way, but they will all be representatives of other parties. That exacerbates the tensions inherent in the system, but again, it is unavoidable.

From the voters' point of view, MMP offers a very poor deal compared with STV-PR. With MMP the voter either has no choice or very little choice of candidate. In the constituency contest the voter is faced with a party list of one candidate. The voter either votes for the party's candidate or votes against his or her preferred party. In most implementations of MMP the voter also has no say at all in which of the list candidates should take the seats allocated to the various parties. That is decided by the order in which names appear on the top-up lists. And that order is decided by the respective parties.

The other main problem with MMP is that it is a party PR voting system. Its objective is only to secure PR of registered political parties. Because it is centred on the political parties (and not on the voters and the candidates) and because of the essential role of the parties in ordering the lists of candidates, MMP entrenches the power of the parties and takes political power away from the voters. The list members in particular, are completely beholden to their parties. List members owe their election entirely to the party that put them in a favourable position on its list (as some of our MSPs discovered to their cost in the 2003 elections to the Scottish Parliament). List members are accountable to that party, not to any constituency of voters.

It has been suggested that MMP might be improved by the adoption of preferential voting in the single-member constituencies ("Alternative Vote" in UK, "Instant Runoff Voting" or "IRV" in USA) and the use of "open lists" for the election of the additional members. Both of these would give marginal improvements, but they would not address the underlying problems inherent in MMP. There would still be two very different types of elected member. There would be minimal choice for the voters among the candidates for the list seats and as a result, there would little likelihood of PR **within** any party. The system would remain a party PR voting system and would do very little to empower the voters.

To ensure that MMP gives party PR that reflects the voters' wishes so far as party PR is concerned, it is necessary for the voters to cast two votes: one for a constituency candidate and a separate vote for a top-up party list. (The constituency votes cannot be used to determine the overall balance of party representation because of the distorting effects of the long-established tactical voting that occurs in single-member contests.) However, the use of two votes in MMP opens the way for some new forms of tactical voting that can completely pervert the intention of obtaining party PR. If large numbers of electors vote for the constituency candidates of one party and vote for the party list of a closely aligned party, that two-party block can very readily take a disproportionately large share of the seats in the Legislature. There is clear evidence of a great deal of "switch voting" by electors in the two MMP elections for the Scottish Parliament. There have been suggestions by some politicians that this feature of MMP should be exploited to obtain majority control of the Parliament by two closely aligned parties who would not otherwise obtain an overall majority. There is no remedy to prevent such exploitation of this defect in MMP by legally registered political parties.

MMP has little to commend it. It is a party PR voting system that would do nothing to empower the voters. It would strengthen and entrench the control of the political system by the parties at the expense of the voters. It would introduce new problems, particularly the election of two very different types of MLA. It would be open to a form of tactical voting that could severely distort the true wishes of the voters in relation to party PR.

MMP is not the way forward to improve the voting system for the Legislature of British Columbia. The two most comparable bodies in the UK that are currently elected by MMP, the Scottish Parliament and the National Assembly of Wales, are both likely to get rid of it in the near future. The National Assembly of Wales has been recommended by an Independent Commission to replace MMP with STV-PR. The Scottish Parliament is likely to be recommended to do the same. The Northern Ireland Assembly is elected by STV-PR and has been since 1973. In June this year the Scottish Parliament voted to adopt STV-PR for future local government elections in Scotland.

In contrast to MMP, STV-PR maximises voter choice and so empowers the voters. It ensures that the elected members are accountable to their local electorates. It shifts the balance of power away from the political parties and restores the central role of the voters in the election process. With STV-PR, democracy is strengthened and stabilised.