

Citizens Assembly, Burnaby, May 5th, 2004

Why do we vote and what do we expect of our voting system?

We vote to participate in the democratic process and we expect our vote to influence the result. That is; we expect our vote to count. Unfortunately, and all too often with First Past The Post constituency representation, our vote does not count since the majority of votes are cast for losing candidates and the minority of votes are cast for winning candidates. By this method we arguably “waste” a majority of the votes cast in an election. Recognition of this fact encourages strategic voting often characterized by such phrases as “I’d like to vote for XXXX party or XXXX candidate but they don’t have a chance so I’m going to vote for XXXX party or XXXX candidate”. Strategic voting subverts the electoral process and can be eliminated or significantly reduced by the choice of more democratic voting systems.

Most observers would agree that our current voting method is “free and fair”. Well, it’s free in the sense that there’s no coercion at the polling place. But, can it be said to be fair when a vote for a winning candidate has influence in the formation of government, and a vote for a losing candidate does not? I believe the answer to this question is.....no!

We expect our vote to be democratic and produce a government that reflects the will of the majority. Unfortunately, as we saw in 1996, the NDP formed a majority government with a minority of the popular vote. Again in 2001, the Liberals secured a justified majority government with 57% of the popular vote and 77 of 79 legislative seats. The problem is that the 43% who voted for other parties are represented by just 2 opposition members occupying only 3% of the legislative seats.

In my opinion, both the 1996 and 2001 British Columbia general election results were totally unacceptable in a modern democracy.

The challenge is to find, promote and introduce to British Columbia a voting system that makes every vote count, encourages sincere voting patterns, is free, fair and produces representative and democratic governments.

We do not have to look far for models that might assist us in meeting the challenges. The Assembly members are, I’m sure, aware that the vast majority of democratic elections are conducted using Proportional Representation (PR) in one of its many forms. I believe, very strongly, that these challenges can be met by the introduction of Proportional Representation in British Columbia

No doubt the Assembly members are also very much aware that our current FPTP electoral system is under assault in many jurisdictions within Canada and outside BC. At the Federal level, the Law Commission of Canada, after extensive and searching consultation has recommended that the Federal Government introduce legislation to change from our current FPTP to an electoral system that would guarantee broadly proportional results.

Please refer to:
Law Commission of Canada
1100-473 Albert Street
Ottawa, Ontario
Canada K1A 0H8

Tel; 613.946.8980
Email; electoral-reform@lcc.gc.ca
www.lcc.gc.ca

And:
Fair Vote Canada
26 Maryland Blvd
Toronto, Ontario
Canada M4C 5C9

Tel; 416.410.4034
Email; info@fairvotecanada.org
www.fairvotecanada.org

My preference is for a mixed member proportional electoral method in which some members are elected by constituency and votes cast for losing candidates are transferred to party pools from which members are elected by “list” to sit as members “at large”. This would achieve local and regional representation by constituency, make all votes count and provide for broad proportionality in election results.

Such a system would tend to reshape the political landscape of British Columbia:

Minority or coalition governments would be more likely and the current polarized 2 party system would be deterred to some extent.

Some smaller parties that are currently excluded from the legislature would reach a voter support threshold and receive legislative reward. This would represent an expansion of voter choice.

General elections in BC would cease to be 79 by-elections and become, instead, an election of truly provincial scope. Parties would change their focus from specific ridings they view as “winnable” to delivering a province wide message when they benefit from votes in all ridings.

I urge the Citizens Assembly to embrace and champion change by offering British Columbians the opportunity to accept a new electoral system incorporating Proportional Representation.

Thanks for your attention. If you have any questions or comments, please contact me.

Les Brown, May, 2004

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