

PRESENTATION SUMMARY

SURREY-SOUTH PUBLIC HEARING
DATED 8 MAY 2004
AT THE ASTON PACIFIC INN

THE FOLLOWING INFORMATION IS A BRIEF SUMMARY OF THE PRESENTATION TO THE CITIZENS' ASSEMBLY ON ELECTORAL REFORM. IT ATTEMPTS TO CAPTURE THE KEY ISSUES AND ARGUMENTS THAT WERE PRESENTED AND DISCUSSED DURING THE PUBLIC HEARING. IN SOME INSTANCES, THE PRESENTER HAS ALSO MADE A SUBMISSION TO THE ASSEMBLY AND THIS IS ACCESSIBLE VIA THE WEBSITE AT WWW.CITIZENSASSEMBLY.BC.CA BY CLICKING ON "GET INVOLVED". IF SUCH A SUBMISSION IS AVAILABLE, IT WILL BE NOTED AT THE END OF THIS REPORT.

Richard Papiernik

DESCRIPTION OF PRESENTATION

Are we fixing the problem the right way?

KEY THEMES

Mr. Papiernik discussed the current model of parliamentary government and its deficiencies. In particular, executive dominance, party discipline, and campaign financing were identified as contributing to a “democratic deficit” in BC. The presenter pointed to the examples of the governments of the North West Territories as models of true responsible government.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The presenter proposed four recommendations:

1. Not to change the electoral system as it is based in the universal democratic principle that one person equals one vote, and where individuals that run for office represent a geographic constituency.
2. If change is recommended by the Citizens’ Assembly then the only improvement to the current system is the introduction of a majority run-off. This would ensure that the elected representative has fifty per cent plus one of the votes cast consistent with the consent of the governed.
3. If major changes are recommended they must provide for a level playing field so ordinary people can run as independent candidates.
4. The Citizens’ Assembly should apply to have its mandate extended enabling it to make recommendations regarding a new system of public financing of party candidates and independents so that both can run for office on a level playing field.

QUESTIONS, ANSWERS AND COMMENTS FROM THE PANEL

Q We’ve seen that voter turnout is declining particularly among the young; do you think that the SMP system and wasted votes has anything to do with this?

A I don’t think the electoral system is the problem, I think the problem is that candidates don’t have any authority when they get to the legislature. In the handout I provided I have a clipping from the

Vancouver Sun that has a reference to the government of the North West Territories and if you look at that you see that there was a 72 per cent voter turnout in the last two elections in the North-West territories. In both those elections all the candidates in those government ran as independents, and if you want to increase voter turnout then you need to find a way to encourage independents to run for public office, by having public financing.

Q Would you outlaw political parties?

A No. We live in a democracy and people should be free to form parties. I would prefer to see, however, strong individuals running for office as independents and that we move toward what is called more of an issue based government. Issues could be brought forward to the legislature and decided on an issue by issue basis, if people choose to form political parties that is their choice but if you want to have an accountable executive it must be accountable to the legislature and the only way to do that is through independent legislators.

Q How do you suggest that we encourage independent members running without changing the current system?

A I suggested in recommendation number four that you apply to have your mandate expanded so political parties and individuals can both run on a level playing field.

Q How important do you think that proportionality is?

I think we need to think carefully about which problem we are trying to fix. I see the problem as the lack of an accountable executive. Giving power to parties through proportionality will never fix that disconnect. You need to have legislators with independent authority.

Q Doesn't STV address these concerns you have?

A If you want to make any changes I would suggest the majority run-off as in France so that the winning candidate has to secure a majority of the vote. You have lost the opportunity to decide who you would like to elect under STV. Computers shouldn't be doing that voters should.

QUESTIONS, ANSWERS AND COMMENTS FROM THE AUDIENCE

Q What benefits do you see in political parties? Isn't in naïve to expect that 79 independent candidates elected to Victoria wouldn't form political parties as they have evolved because of the very need for people to join together in the legislature?

A We need to transcend ideologies and move towards principles. Political parties are a necessary evil at the start of democracies, but hopefully as we progress we can transcend the need for them.

Q Politicians should be able to tell the public what their positions are ahead of time and then the voters should be able to rank them according to their preferences. Why do you need a second ballot?

A Technically I think you're right, however, I would rather have a separate second round run-off where the top two candidates face you the citizens and answer where they stand on positions and you have an opportunity to vote again.

Q Can you justify the extra cost?

A I think our democracy is priceless and it is worth doing it.