PRESENTATION SUMMARY

VANCOUVER PUBLIC HEARING
DATED 29 MAY 2004
AT VANCOUVER CONVENTION CENTRE

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.

Tim Howard

DESCRIPTION OF PRESENTATION

My views on the shortcomings of the current FPTP system, the desirability of moving to a MMP-style system in which voter's choices are more accurately reflected in the make up of the Legislature, and recommendations on safeguards that need to be built into any referendum process to ensure transparency and a level playing field.

KEY THEMES

Mr. Howard discussed the shortcomings of the current FPTP system including the disjunction between society and the representation in Victoria; the practice of polarized party politics that result in wild swings of policy pushed through most often by a government that only possesses a plurality of the vote; executive dominance of the legislature; and cabinet dominance of the civil service. According to Mr. Howard, these shortcomings have engendered a lack of trust in the administration and political disengagement particularly among youth. As a result of the absence of legislative codification of powers, artificial majorities, and party discipline legislating is delegated to non-elected officials who are open to the influence of vested interests.

Mr. Howard proposed five criteria for evaluating whether or not electoral reform constitutes positive change:

1. Does the system produce a legislature that more accurately reflects votes cast?

2. Does the system tend toward stability?

3. Does the system nurture a relationship between a region and a representative?

4. Does the system permit new entrants, thereby allowing the reflection of societal change?

5. Is the system understandable?

RECOMMENDATIONS

Mr. Howard recommended:

1. That the same rules of transparency that are applied to campaign donations should be applied to any third party or political party that chooses to advocate within the referendum process itself.

2. Create a window of time in which paid advertising is permissible.

3. Place a ceiling on how much can be spent.

4. The role of the Citizens' Assembly should be continued to carry forward through the referendum process, so that the citizens when faced with a question actually have resources visiting their communities that they can ask questions of.

QUESTIONS, ANSWERS AND COMMENTS FROM THE AUDIENCE

Q   Have you considered fining people for not voting in order to encourage more participation?

A   Personally, I don't think financial or criminal penalties are appropriate for the act of voting. I don't think that a hostage electorate that is forced to vote is a genuine reflection of democratic participation. And I think that a society that permits you to opt out of voting that is an important element of the expression of democratic will and I think frankly it could be challenged under the Charter as not voting is arguably an act of political expression.

Q   Do you see referendums as a major democratic tool in local small groups as well as in larger constituencies?

A   Within the context of BC, referenda is an impotent tool as it is currently designed under the legislation we have. Personally, I don't support the frequent use of referendums as a means of shaping public policy. I don't think that elected governments should be constantly responsive to referenda on discrete issues. It can result in a sensationalized manner of developing policy that can endure for generations. My knowledge of referenda in California is that it has hamstrung the body politic. I don't think that having people vote more often is actually a true measure of democratic health.

Q   What do you consider a stable government?

A   I don't know if I can provide a coherent assessment of what is a stable government. What I had in mind was an electoral mechanism that balances the equitable translation of votes into seats with the need to prevent the splintering of representation to such a degree that governing becomes unmanageable.