

A Proposal for Deliberative Democracy

(Document provided on 07 September 2004 by Sam Sullivan, Vancouver city councillor, following his oral presentation to the public hearing in Vancouver on June 12, 2004.)

A democracy strives to represent the will of the people but ever since Meletus and his gang convinced the voters of Athens to condemn Socrates to death it has been clear that the democratic ideal has not been achieved.

Discerning the will of the citizen is much more difficult than most people realize. The reason is that what is often considered to be the will of the people is in fact simply their feelings. A true democracy should strive to represent the will of the people not their feelings. I can describe the difference by asking you to consider your own experience.

Recall your first day with the Citizens Assembly. If you had voted that day for the best electoral system I suspect that your vote would have been markedly different from the vote you will cast at the end of the process. This presents supporters of democracy with a major problem. We have one voter but two different votes, one citizen but two different wills. One of these is surely the true will and the other the false will; one is your genuine will while the other is a caricature of your will.

I believe that there is only one true will of the people and this will can only be determined through a deliberative process. I suspect your ideas on electoral systems are changing week to week but I also suspect that the range of variation is becoming smaller. At the point where the variation is no longer significant, that is the deliberative will.

I believe that you should abandon the enterprise that every other electoral reform process has fixated on – that of faithfully and accurately translating the feelings of the people, not their will, into seats in the legislature. This is the fundamental flaw of this entire discussion.

Most electoral systems do not elicit the will of the people. They elicit the feelings of the people. The reasons people put an X beside a name on a ballot often have little to do with considerations of good government or a deep consideration of the issues. Family voting patterns or the opinions of friends figure highly. Even more important are media spins and brief perceptions drawn from off-hand statements captured on a newscast. Spin doctors appealing to hot button issues will figure prominently in the decisions. This type of decision-making should be an embarrassment to all who cherish the democratic ideal and citizens should feel resentful when they have clearly not been informed nor given the resources to make such an important decision.

Electoral reform processes often feature mathematicians who shuffle and reshuffle votes and analyze the different outcomes. The problem is that their raw material is not the will of the people, rather it is the feelings of the people. Your efforts should be directed to eliciting from the citizens their deliberative will, their true will. The electoral reform I am asking you to consider can work within any electoral system. It consists in requiring all politicians and parties to submit themselves, their promises, their platforms, and their credentials to a rigorous citizen assembly type process. A randomly chosen representative sample of the citizenry managed through the lieutenant governor's office would define the challenges facing the province, set the framework for the government, including salaries and duties, evaluate the politicians and their parties and come to a consensus of the best makeup for the next government.

Election campaigns would happen as always, political parties would organize as always, and citizens would make their way to polling stations as always but upon their arrival the recommendations and rationale of the deliberative assembly would be provided to them.

I and many other voters want a way to determine our collective deliberative will, our true will, even if we are not able to spend time and energy to go through the deliberative process on our own. Instead we find that every electoral system currently on the smorgasbord of options forces we the citizens to express our feelings not our will.

Our knowledge of statistics and human behavior has given us an ability to determine a lot about large populations from small randomly chosen samples of the population. We have seen that one randomly chosen group of people will come to the same conclusions as another randomly chosen group. It is therefore possible for us to use these techniques to conduct a manageable process of determining the will of the people.

Although we could keep the current provincial ward system with my recommendation and still achieve excellent results I believe an at large system of government would be preferable as it would offer the most flexibility. The citizen assembly and not the parties would prioritize the list of candidates. The evaluation of the citizen assembly would not just be helpful insights or a guide to the candidates it would be a definitive recommendation on the make-up of government and if this could not be achieved would include dissenting opinions

At last, the size of the legislature could be significantly reduced, the ministerial system could be abandoned, politicians would govern and not manage, government would be by a legislature not by legislators and an environment could be created for the cultivation of a high quality, professional, de-politicized civil service. Voter turnout would increase as citizens would feel confident in the value of their vote and that the citizens assembly's recommendations would represent their true will if they themselves had been chosen.

The impact of this proposal on government and the way politics is practiced in BC and throughout the world would be profound. Gone would be the temptation to alter decisions for the hope of future votes. Gone would be the inevitable influence of funding on decision-making. Gone would be the war between spin-doctors who fight their battles on the minds of citizens who do not have the time to evaluate their claims. Gone would be the popularity contests and personality cults.

At last we will achieve a society where the children of Meletus would languish for lack of an audience, where the children of Socrates would die of old age and where, after 2,403 years, we achieve the ideals of democracy.

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