

PRESENTATION SUMMARY

WILLIAMS LAKE PUBLIC HEARING
DATED 19 JUNE 2004
AT THE OVERLANDER HOTEL
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.

Bruce Mack

DESCRIPTION OF PRESENTATION

(a) Address problems without creating new ones; (b) “Electoral Reform” may be too narrow a mandate.

KEY THEMES

Mr. Mack discussed the need to avoid tinkering around the edges of the electoral system rather than fixing the problem. The presenter argued that the recommended electoral system can play a role in improving voter apathy and turnout but is not likely to change how government operates.

Mr. Mack discussed a number of electoral systems including:

1. FPTP: Mr. Mack argued that this system provides the best constituency representation and accountability but contributes to current problems of major swings in the composition of the legislature and also creates a sense among many voters that their votes don't count.
2. Proportioanl Representation: The presenter stated that while this system has a number of obvious benefits, including the equitable translation of votes into seats, it significantly reduces constituency representation and accountability while increasing party control. Voters have no power over the selection of MLAs, regional representation is compromised, and it is unclear to which body of citizens such MLAs are accountable to. In fact, individual MLAs may be elected with very little voter support.
3. Single Transferable Vote: According to Mr. Mack this system would create ridings of an unmanageable size as each district would need to have at least three seats. This creates a major problem for rural constituencies that are already approaching an unmanageable size.
4. MMP: Mr. Mack argued that this system may produce the best or the worst of each system. If seats are allocated by parties, and not necessarily on a geographical basis, questions of accountability emerge and may increase disillusionment with government.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Mr. Mack advocated the introduction of MMP with a clearly defined system to determine who is elected. Under this system, a range of between 50-60% of seats would be filled using FPTP, and between 40-50% of candidates would be elected under PR. The presenter recommended that the FPTP MLAs be those elected with the highest ratio of margin of victory divided by the number of voters.

Further, the PR MLA's would be those within the party to be allocated seats with either the highest ratio of margin of victory divided by the number of voters or in the case of candidates who did not win the most votes, those with the lowest ratio of margin of loss divided by the number of voters. According to Mr. Mack, this method rests on the rationale that the MLAs elected are those with the highest level of voter support in their own constituency. The presenter argued that in the absence of such a system, the proportional seats would be allocated by the parties thus increasing party control at the expense of constituency representation and accountability. Finally, Mr. Mack noted the need for the Citizens' Assembly to comment on the problem of party discipline, arguing that while electoral reform will not fix the problem, the issue should be raised to potentially aid a move toward a more effective legislature in which MLAs can better perform the representative function for which they are elected.

QUESTIONS, ANSWERS AND COMMENTS FROM THE PANEL

- Q Are you recommending that we would keep the same ridings and the, for example, 60 members that get the highest ratio would be elected, and all the other candidates would go into a second pool and the parties would get to pick the candidates with the highest ratios depending on the number of candidates they are entitled to?
- A The party would not get to pick. It would be picked by the formula. Ridings may go to people that came in second depending on the over-, or under-, representation of the members already elected.
- Q Will this system foster representation by smaller parties, or will it encourage parties to get together to achieve a larger ratio?
- A I think any form of PR encourages the formation of minority parties as our current system closes the door on them unless they are regionally based. If they are regionally based they have the potential to win ridings, but if they are not, they don't. So any form of PR raises the hopes of parties being elected with 10 or 15% of the vote. I don't believe, however, that PR is a panacea. It is not going to create a more open government or coalitions as party discipline undermines those tendencies. I don't think that the electoral system is going to

have a major impact on that. Minor parties may choose to form larger coalitions but they wouldn't necessarily.

QUESTIONS, ANSWERS AND COMMENTS FROM THE AUDIENCE

Q You expressed a great concern that we would still end up with an elected dictatorship, do you feel that your system addresses that problem?

A I don't think that any electoral reform would adequately address that problem as parties may still form a majority under any system. The members are only accountable once every four years and there is very little discussion of key issues. I don't think electoral change will enhance accountability in the system.

Q You express dissatisfaction with party control of members; I would suggest that certain forms of PR could alleviate that via the election of independents and the use of open party lists. Could you comment on that?

A I'm not sure I agree with that. Regardless of the method of election there is always room for party control, and I think that this may be exacerbated under PR if the members are being selected by the party, and I believe that PR works against the election of independents.