
The British Columbia Citizens' Assembly: A Round Table

by Gordon Campbell, Joyce MacPhail, Paul Nettleton, Geoff Plant, Jeff Bray, Greg Halsey-Brandt, Mike Hunter, Pat Bell, Blair Suffredine, Bill Bennett

As part of its campaign platform in 2001 the current government of British Columbia promised to appoint a committee of citizens to assess all possible models for electing MLAs and to recommend changes to the current electoral system that could be put to a province wide referendum. The Government appointed Gordon Gibson to prepare a report on how the Citizen's Assembly should be organised. He presented his report on December 23, 2002. In April 2003 the Government responded by introducing a motion supporting the creation of a Citizens' Assembly on Electoral Reform and appointing a Special Committee of the Legislative Assembly to review the nomination of the Chair of the Citizens' Assembly and receive interim reports on the progress of the Assembly. The following extracts from the debates of the British Columbia Legislative Assembly illustrate a number of issues related to establishment of a Citizens' Assembly including certain areas where the Government proposals differ from the Gibson Report. For the full debate on this topic see British Columbia's Hansard for April 30, 2003.



Gordon Campbell, MLA (Premier of British Columbia): If you go back to 1858, this is the first time in 145 years we are actually giving the people of British Columbia a direct say in how they should elect the MLAs that are meant to serve them. After all, in a democracy, we should remember we are here at the service and the pleasure of the people of

this province. On April 17, 1999, while still in opposition, I said that it was time we gave the people of B.C. the right to demonstrate how they want to elect their MLAs. I am proud to stand here today and say that this is the first government in the history of British Columbia, in the history of our country, that has given the people that right.

There is no more fundamental tenet that we agree to as we seek office. The rules of the democracy should be designed by the people they serve, not by the power bro-

kers who may wish that the democracy worked in their interests. It is by turning to the people and trusting the public that I believe we can re-establish the critical link between our democratic institutions and those that they are supposed to serve.

As we entered office, we wanted to try to restore and re-establish the trust of the public for their public institutions. I can think of no more important way to do that than for those of us who are fortunate enough to be elected and to serve in these institutions to trust the public's judgement and to trust the public wisdom as we fashion a legislature that will truly meet the needs of every single part of this province.

Since 1949 there was not a government in this province elected by more than 50 percent of the popular vote. There have been people that have asked legitimate questions with regard to how we elect our elected representatives. The former MLA Nick Loenen, who has looked at

this and examined this for some time, has some suggestions for how he thinks we could improve the system. I know members of this chamber will have their own suggestions.

The critical thing for us to recognise is that in a democracy, the open sharing of information, the open search for solutions to reform, to reinvigorate and to revitalise our public institutions should be an ongoing learning experience. It should be an ongoing search for discovery of what will do the best for the people that live in our province. I am proud to support this motion, and I am proud to be part of a legislature that has tabled it in the hopes that we can create that revitalisation.

Last September the government asked Gordon Gibson, a former member of this House, a former leader of a political party in the province but, more importantly, someone who has spent his life examining our public institutions to make recommendations that form the foundation for the motion which is before this House today.

In keeping our commitment to people, we said prior to the election that we believed the assembly should be selected like a jury. It should be randomly selected. It should be a selection process that reaches out to each part of this province and, indeed, is reflective of the people that live here in this province. Building on the foundation of Mr. Gibson's recommendations, our recommendation that you will see in the terms of reference says that we have asked the chief electoral officer to help guide a randomly selected citizens' assembly.

We all know that every British Columbian who is eligible to vote and eligible to be on the voters list has not necessarily registered. I would like to tell the members of the assembly and the public today that we want to encourage that registration. We will try to encourage it to take place in ways that will build our voters list and make sure that as many people as possible are registered, that we at least give citizens the chance to register.

The chief electoral officer will then be asked to stratify a sample of names. That provides for an equal number of names from each riding. It will provide for an equal number of men and women. It will provide for a distribution that is reflective of the age of British Columbians. Anyone who is 18 years or over and on the voters list will be eligible. Again, we want our assembly to be reflective of the generations that live in British Columbia, of the regions that exist in British Columbia and of the interests that exist in British Columbia.

Interested persons will be able to attend local selection meetings. It is important for all of us to recognise that this is an act of true citizenship. It is an act that will require those who participate to become educated, to spend time in deliberation and in public hearings across the prov-

ince. I believe that it is critical that they know both their obligations and their responsibilities, as well as the timetable for action that will be laid out for the citizens' assembly.

We said that we wanted membership to be representative of the entire province. There is not a member in this House that does not recognise what an enormous place British Columbia is, how vast our province is and indeed how vast even regions within the province can be. In terms of meeting the needs of the regions of the people who live there, we wanted to be sure that there was broad representation from each part and each corner of the province. To achieve that, the terms of reference provide a large membership of two members for each of the electoral districts that serve in this province, for a total of 158 members plus the chair, which will make the citizens' assembly 159.

We said we would have a mandate to hold public hearings throughout B.C. That will take place. And again, I want to say this clearly to this House. We have recommended the appointment of a chair, and as you will know from the second motion before the House, it is suggested that a special legislative committee be established to review that nomination from the government. Should that legislative committee unanimously support the chair, then we will ask the chair to look at how this process should work, how many meetings should take place and where they should take place. But the spirit and the intent of the government are clear, and the budget for the assembly is clear. We expect those meetings to be taking place throughout the province. It is important to allow the people of our province to have not just the oral opportunity but also the written opportunity to present to the citizens' assembly. That is provided for in the terms of reference.

We said we wanted to ensure clear endorsement by the assembly. Now, those of us who have been involved in public life for some time know there is nothing that can take up more time than a constitutional debate, a debate about the ifs and buts and what-ifs and maybes that take place in the world. I have experienced this at the local level of government, and I have seen it time and time again where, because there is no single decision that is made, there is never a decision to improve the system.

We have specifically asked the assembly to recommend a specific change. If the assembly recommends a change by a majority vote of the assembly, that will require at least 80 members of the assembly to support it. If the assembly recommends a change, then that option will be submitted to a province wide referendum on May 17, 2005.

The government wants to ensure that all British Columbians have an opportunity to vote before any change is adopted. We want to be sure any change that is adopted is truly endorsed by the regions of the province and the people of the province. We believe this is a fundamental and significant change, and we therefore have placed a double approval process in place.

First, the assembly must receive a 50-percent-plus-one approval rate from 60 percent of the ridings in the province. That is important, because at the end of the day we know we have to bring the whole province together as we make these changes, if indeed they should be recommended.

Secondly, this change will require 60 percent overall voter approval. There are some who have already suggested that that is too high an approval rating. Clearly, the government disagrees with that. We believe that a significant change should require the kind of approval that says, indeed, a great majority of people in this province feel that they will benefit from this change.

I believe this is a very important step. One of the critical keystones of this assembly's success will rest in the person of the chair. It was important, I believe, for the chair to truly guide the assembly as we move forward. As you know, the government has nominated Dr. Jack Blaney, the former president of Simon Fraser University, the current chair of the Fraser Basin Council, the man who was the driving force behind the dialogue centre at Simon Fraser University, which is internationally recognised as a centre for building learning and understanding and for decisive decision-making. Mr. Blaney is known not just as a conceptual thinker but as a consensus builder. I believe he brings significant talents to the onerous task that lies ahead.

I want to be clear about this. I certainly do not know what a citizens' assembly will decide. I do know that given the opportunity, citizens will be creative, will be thoughtful, will be integrative, will concern themselves with our entire province, will concern themselves with how government truly can serve the needs and the ideas of British Columbians from every corner of this province.



Joyce MacPhail, MLA (Leader of the Opposition): Over a year ago I wrote to the Premier as leader of the NDP offering our support for a process whereby the people of British Columbia could participate in a non-partisan discussion of electoral reform. It is worth noting that Canada is one of the few liberal democracies continuing to use the

first-past-the-post system. Elsewhere, the first-past-the-post system has been losing ground certainly in recent years.

In 1993 New Zealanders voted in a referendum to scrap first-past-the-post and to replace it with proportional representation. In the United Kingdom the Labour government, in its first term, introduced versions of proportional representation into the elections for the new Scottish, Welsh and Northern Ireland assemblies. The government also adopted proportional representation for the election of United Kingdom members of the European Parliament in 1999 and is considering holding a referendum on reforming elections to the Westminster Parliament.

In Canada as a whole, the proportion of Canadians expressing dissatisfaction with the electoral system increased from 39 percent to 49 percent just between the years of 1990 and 2000 — a big shift by the beginning of this decade. The biggest change was registered right here in British Columbia, where the proportion of respondents who find first-past-the-post unacceptable increased from 43 percent to a full 63 percent — the highest level of dissatisfaction of any region. That study was by Howe and Northrup in 2000.

A survey conducted in early 2001 by the Canada West Foundation found that 71.6 percent of westerners, including 75.9 percent of British Columbians, favour the introduction of an electoral system based on proportional representation.

I would like to take some of the highlights that our proposal made to the Premier. At the time, my proposal contemplated an appointed commission that would have included expertise from other jurisdictions and then an accompanying process that would have allowed the general population to participate in a referendum on a selection of options, followed then by a final referendum on a single option.

The government this week has brought forward an alternative model, which is in large part the result of the hard work of Mr. Gordon Gibson. He has considered this problem at length, along with the assistance of many knowledgeable British Columbians, and has also considered the expectations of government and the promises it has made.

I would be remiss if I did not point out that Fair Vote Canada and others have expressed concern for the requirement of a supermajority, which is seen as an impediment to achieving the kinds of reform that some — I would say many — people are hoping for.

Acknowledging some of the shortcomings of this proposal but also acknowledging the need for reform, I do not want to impede the progress of this debate, whatever

the form through which it will take place. But we also want to hold true to the commitment, best articulated by Mr. Gibson, that the process, from beginning to end, be as transparent as is possible.

Therefore, when I was approached by the government some weeks ago with the suggestion for appointing Mr. Blaney as chair, rather than holding to Mr. Gibson's suggestion of a candidate search by a committee of the Legislature, I made an alternate suggestion that fell between the government's original suggestion of merely appointing Mr. Blaney and Mr. Gibson's suggestion about a rather longer process of selection. I suggested that a confirmation hearing might be the way to meet the test of transparency but also deal with the very real problem of a limited time line on this initiative.

I am pleased that the government acknowledged that suggestion and put it in place. I am also pleased that the government has sought to make the process more transparent by allowing for confirmation hearings for the lead staff. That was another suggestion I made a few weeks ago, and I am pleased the government has embraced it.

Despite the late date for the beginning of this process, many of the suggestions from Mr. Gibson are sage and should not be dismissed without full regard for the potential impact of dismissing his suggestions on both process and outcome. The government has accepted many of Mr. Gibson's suggestions, but I am concerned that it has left unanswered the matter of taking the time to make sure all British Columbians know they need to be on the voters list.

I did hear the Premier address that in his remarks earlier, except I do note that just a couple of days ago, April 28, the government backgrounder on the summary of the Citizens' Assembly on Electoral Reform has this response to a recommendation made by Mr. Gibson: "Mr. Gibson recommended that the selection process should be preceded by a publicity campaign for those not on the voters list to sign up." The decision listed by the government is: "No decision taken. Await recommendations of the chair."

I hope we can take the Premier's words now that this government is going to proceed with a publicity campaign. However, I am concerned that the chair has not been granted the authority to make minor adjustments that may result in a change in the voters list and that would change the makeup of the assembly to better represent the population as a whole. I would therefore propose an amendment to the motion to add up to four additional members of the Assembly, randomly drawn from a category or categories of persons selected by the Chair. This amendment would grant the chair the opportunity to adjust the membership of the assembly to com-

pensate for the under-representation of minority communities, as well as allow an alternative approach to the problems associated with using the voters list to draw the membership from.

Of course, in particular, should the chair determine there is not enough time to conduct a program of publicly encouraging sign-up over the course of two to three months — again, a recommendation Mr. Gibson made and the government has remained silent on until the Premier's speech today — then some 800,000 British Columbians will not be considered for membership.

As Mr. Gibson points out, the group most underrepresented is young people between the ages of 18 to 24. I am sure all members of the Legislature join with me in wanting to make sure that generation is properly represented. This would be one way the chair could try to make amends for failings in the sample process.

Another example I give you on perhaps the potential for underrepresentation is this. Aboriginal persons make up only around 2 percent of the British Columbia population and so would only, by the law of averages, take up three positions in an assembly of 158 persons. Mathematically, the standard deviation on a number so small is close to two, meaning that the actual number selected could be just one aboriginal person or perhaps even none. It would be a shame if these proud people, who have a special constitutional role in the history and future of British Columbia, were to be completely excluded.



Paul Nettleton, MLA: I support the motion to take very seriously Mr. Gibson's recommendation, as referenced by the Leader of the Opposition, that the chair of the citizens' assembly be able to appoint four members.

I am disappointed to learn that the government has rejected this recommendation. Even the most carefully constructed, randomly developed selection process is subject to issues of potential underrepresentation. That is why even the government here takes public opinion survey results with a large grain of salt or two. There is just no way they are done perfectly, and so we must compensate.

The goal is to get a citizens' assembly to look at electoral reform, and that assembly would be composed of people representative of the population of our province. What happens if, as luck would have it, a certain group such as aboriginals are left off the assembly after the names have been pulled from the hat? Surely, the gov-

ernment would want to have a first nations perspective on this most important issue. Surely, they would want to be known for allowing for the input of British Columbians from all walks of life. Surely, that is why Mr. Gibson has added this recommendation and has done so in a reasoned and cautious manner. Funny that the government now rejects this.

You would think that on the one hand, they are so committed to making electoral reform happen in the interests of enhancing democracy as it is practised in this province. But on the other hand, the government appears not to be doing so, or at least not doing their utmost to ensure that the assembly itself — the bedrock of this new-era promise — is properly constructed and constituted.

In conclusion, I support the inclusion of this recommendation when it comes to the selection of the citizens' assembly. It will ensure that the assembly does the job it will be entrusted to do to the best of its ability and in a thorough manner.



Geoff Plant, MLA (Attorney-General): I appreciate the spirit with which the amendment is offered — that is, to ensure that the citizens' assembly is as broadly representative of British Columbia as it can be.

I think the Leader of the Opposition was right to point out that in the documents we released a day or so ago at the time we released Mr. Gibson's report, we stated that government had essentially not taken a position that we would undertake a campaign to encourage voter registration at this point. We thought that might be a matter that could be left to the chair, but actually I think we do have an obligation here as government to do some of that work now.

When the Premier said in his remarks earlier that he thought that we did have an obligation to encourage voter registration, he meant it. That is the view that we have as government, so there will be some work done in that regard that does not require that we wait until the appointment of the chair. It may be that the appointment of the chair will not take long, in which case some of this work may overlap with the chair's appointment.

I think we have to acknowledge that there is an issue with respect to underrepresentation in the voters list. That issue was identified by Mr. Gibson. We acknowledge it, and I think we understand and accept an obligation to move forward to help address that issue. I believe it is almost inevitably the case that that work will involve some activity on the part of the Elections B.C. folks, and I

intend to commence that discussion immediately. In terms of making sure that we address this issue of underrepresentation, I want to assure the House that we take that issue seriously, and we are going to move forward with it.

There is also the issue of making sure that the assembly has the input of all British Columbians. I think that assurance is implicit in the fact that we believe this assembly has an obligation to spend some time travelling around the province and listening to British Columbians. I think the members of the assembly will feel an obligation to listen to and receive input from all British Columbians, so all British Columbians will indeed have an opportunity to provide input to the assembly.

But the question that the amendment speaks to, fundamentally, is: how do we constitute the assembly? We think that the principle of random selection is important. When we spoke to Mr. Gibson about his recommendations with respect to the size and composition of the assembly, we asked him, among other things, whether and to what extent his views about the size of the assembly were influenced by the fact that the terms of reference for his work required that he take into consideration issues of budget.

He said that, in fact, his views were to some extent influenced by the issue of budget. To put that in another way, in offering the recommendation that the assembly should be somewhere between 79 and 100 or so people, Mr. Gibson was trying to live within the terms of a budget that he thought was reasonable. That process, influenced or not by budget, inevitably led Mr. Gibson to wrestle pretty hard with the question of: how do you get an assembly that is as representative as possible?

The members of the assembly and members of the public who have read Mr. Gibson's report will have seen, that he identified that it is not necessarily the easiest issue in the world and also offered a number of ideas for how to get to an assembly that would be as representative as possible of the interests of all British Columbians.

Our view is that the majority of the concerns about representativeness of the assembly can actually be dealt with and are being dealt with in our proposal, which is essentially to double the size of the assembly. When I read the analysis in Mr. Gibson's report that supports the amendment that the opposition leader has put forward, I read it from the perspective of the context that Mr. Gibson had before him. I think that because the circumstances have changed in a pretty important way, the need for the amendment and the need for the process contemplated by the amendment have also changed.

By making the assembly essentially twice as large as it had originally been conceived it could be, we have in-

creased significantly the chance that the assembly will be representative of the broad diversity of British Columbia. We know going in that the first round of selection of possible members of the assembly will be organised in a way that ensures gender balance, geographic distribution and some measure of age balance.

By doubling the size of the assembly, I think we have made it much more likely that we are going to achieve a balanced and representative assembly. If we abandon the principle of randomness to adopt a principle that says the chair or some other person can select members of the assembly, there are, I think, both practical and theoretical problems.

First of all, the practical problems. It is not completely clear where the names will come from that will constitute the source of the top-up members or proposed members that are contemplated. I have to say that while the voters list is clearly the best tool for identifying the right class of British Columbians to participate in this process, the voters list does not tell us very much about people other than their names and their places of residence.

To get beyond that, even to deal with issues of age and gender will require a bit of work on the part of those who undertake the first stratification. To get beyond that even further, to explore issues of ethnic identity, and so on, will require even more work and perhaps a measure of invasion of personal privacy, in some respects, that some may find difficult to accept. I am not saying that those issues are insurmountable obstacles, but it seems to me that they are pretty important practical challenges.

The philosophical issue, I think, is where I finally come to a landing on the proposed amendment. I think that by giving the chair the power to appoint members to the assembly, we are changing in a pretty important way the fundamental makeup of the assembly.

There will be some members who will have been selected by random and some who will have been appointed by the chair. It may be that you could do it in a way that that would not be known. I am not sure how certain you could be about keeping that so for the whole time that the assembly was at work. The main reason why that is so is because, if the member's proposal were to be accepted, there would be at least one and as many as four constituencies that would have one, two, three or four more members representing their constituency than would be produced by the proposal that we have here, which will have two constituents from each constituency in the province.

I do not claim that these things are absolutely black and white. I do not know that there is an absolutely right answer to these things. I think that the extent to which it takes a bit of time to think your way through them is

made clear by the fact that Mr. Gibson took quite a bit of time to think his way through them.

We have changed the framework a little bit by doubling the size of the assembly. I think that has a great likelihood of producing an assembly that is broadly representative of the people of British Columbia. We are going to do some work to give all those people in British Columbia who could be on the voters list, but are not, a chance to sign up if they want to. That is probably work we should always be doing in any event.

For those reasons, I think that we should maintain the basic structure of the recommendations set out in the terms of reference, and the government will not be supporting the amendment put forward by the opposition leader.

(Editor's Note: The Amendment was defeated by a vote of 64 - 2. Debate then continued on the main motion)



Jeff Bray, MLA: For my constituents, the issue of electoral reform and the citizens' assembly is very prominent. Members of my community have had great anticipation that we would reach this day and that a real process would be developed to let the voters review and choose the method of electing their MLAs. The subject is important be-

cause politics comprises the institutions, rules and practices which permit and limit access to state power.

Politics is the space between citizens and state. It was W.H. Auden who said: "There is no such thing as the perfect democratic state, good for all time." Our political institutions change even when we are not paying attention to them. But as circumstances change, so, too, will our attention focus from time to time on the need to embrace more consciously the project of political reform.

The question of electoral reform raised in 1996 has not been answered, but it may have been redefined. At times the current debate focuses more on ways of ensuring political parties are happy with the number of seats they get on election day, but the fundamental goal of elections is not to serve the needs of political parties. The goal of elections is to give citizens a voice in choosing their government. Thus the urgent question for 1996, 2001 and all elections is: how do we create a system that better serves all the people of the province?

The history of electoral reform in British Columbia has traditionally focused not on enfranchising political par-

ties but enfranchising voters. In 1876, for example, B.C. dropped property ownership as a qualification to vote, thereby expanding the franchise. Forty years later the province extended voting rights to women. The voting age has been dropped over time from 21 to 18. Even the most significant changes in the last ten years have focused on reforming politics to better serve the interests of voters — for example, the 1995 *Recall and Initiative Act*.

Of course, there is also a legislative history of regulating political parties, culminating in the 1995 *Election Act*, a statute which prescribes, in 160 pages of mind-numbing detail, the way in which we are and are not permitted to engage in electoral democracy. But the main focus is, and ought to be, not the political party but the voter. We must re-engage the public in the whole process around elections, around having representatives and around engaging that communication between government and individuals. We have heard a lot of talk over the last several years about the disinterest that young people feel in elections and the electoral process, that various levels of government are seeing declining numbers of people turning out to vote as they feel the system does not reflect their wishes. That is not good for democracy; that is not good for the Canadian way of life or the British Columbia way of life. It is time for us to engage in the conversation with British Columbians, by British Columbians, for British Columbians about how to re-engage people in the process of elections.

We cannot redesign our electoral system without asking ourselves the question: what is it we expect our MLAs to do?

Jeff Bray

It is not an easy task, but I do believe that we need to ensure that our inquiry is not limited to a mindset that automatically identifies partisan representation as a benchmark of a successful electoral system. To date, our government has amended the *Constitution Act* to provide that, barring dissolution for lack of confidence, provincial general elections will be held on the second Tuesday in May every four years. Similarly, we have followed up the fixed election date reform with laws establishing a fixed date for tabling the provincial budget and a set legislative calendar. We have also committed to free votes in the Legislature to permit MLAs to vote freely on behalf of their constituents on all matters not specifically identified as a vote of confidence.

This brings us back to the citizens' assembly. B.C. is a unique political entity. We are neither New Zealand nor

Germany nor Israel. Our population is widely dispersed and diverse.

The fundamental objective of the citizens' assembly takes us back to the fundamental objective of electoral reform. To achieve this objective, we believe it necessary to take the question of electoral reform out of the hands of politicians and place it in the hands of people we are elected to serve. The challenge was to find a way to create a citizens' assembly that effectively represents the citizens of this province and gives voice to their concerns.

The motion before us now answers that challenge. This motion sets forth the terms of reference that will ensure that the process will reflect the views of citizens picked at random, that the system will reflect the views of all regions — urban, semi-urban and rural — and that should a change be recommended there is enough time for public debate and education before the referendum question.

What the citizens' assembly is going to be reviewing is how we hold elections for the next 150 years perhaps, just as we have not really had this process in the first 150 years. We are not just talking about doing things for the Liberal Party or the Green Party or the NDP Party, because 100 years from now all those parties will probably have different names and be talking about different things, but the voter will still be there. We have to ensure that 50 and 60 years from now, voters are not so disengaged from the process of elections that it almost makes it meaningless.



Greg Halsey-Brandt, MLA: The first-past-the-post system has indeed stood the test of time across Canada, because it has brought stability to our governments. We have had relatively few minority governments in Canada or in British Columbia. However, as was stated earlier by other members, the drawback is that many parties and

people in our province and in Canada who make up perhaps a smaller minority of voters in those constituencies feel that their interests are not being served.

When we do look around the world, in fact, there are many different methods of elections that are being used. Part of the pleasure of the particular portfolio that I hold in intergovernmental relations is the opportunity to meet with many ambassadors or consul generals representing those countries around the world. Just yesterday I had the opportunity to introduce to this Legislature the ambassador from Hungary. I had the opportunity after that to have a brief meeting with him. One of the items we did cover, because I knew this was coming up today, was

what system they used in Hungary. It is fascinating, because in a sense it is very new to their nation.

As we know, when the end of the Cold War came in the late 1980s, Hungary was a one-party state. That is what the constitution in fact laid out in that nation. At the end of the eighties they had to sit down and decide how they wanted to be governed as a new nation of Hungary in 1989.

A nation of ten million people, fairly small in geographic area, had a little over 300 deputies in their Legislature. The system they chose was to do half of those deputies by geographic areas — by riding, if you will — and half based on proportional representation. There was a caveat that parties had to get 5 percent, at least, of the popular vote in order to qualify for that proportional representation. If they did not get that, they were redistributed to other parties on a preferential ballot. That is how they came, as a new nation, to understand how democracy would work in that country.

Sort of the other extreme is Holland. I understand that in that country, there are no ridings per se. It is all done by proportional representation. Perhaps in a country that small in terms of geographic area that system could work well for them.

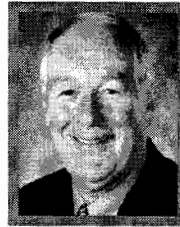
Perhaps first-past-the-post will be chosen as the best system, and that will be the end of the debate, but perhaps another system that reflects the diverse geography and wide variety of political viewpoints will be recommended to the electorate.

Greg Halsey-Brandt

New Zealand was mentioned by the Leader of the Opposition a few minutes ago. It brought in a combination of geographical ridings and proportional representation back in 1993. Each person in each one of those ridings gets two ballots — one for their local member and one for the party list that comes out that they wish to vote for.

The thing that intrigued me about New Zealand was that they were perhaps wise enough to build into this change they brought in that they would review it after two or three elections to see how it worked out. The population would have a chance to perhaps have another referendum, after two or three elections passed, to see if they were comfortable with that system or whether they wanted to go back to their old system. That is something that the citizens' assembly might think about.

This motion on the citizens' assembly offers us a chance to have a fresh look at our electoral methods in British Columbia. Most importantly, the responsibility for this review is with the people of British Columbia, randomly selected. Perhaps unfortunately for some of us, it is not involving the politicians, as we have a very strong vested interest and are a little too close to the question.



Mike Hunter, MLA: I have to say that my entry into public life was a bit of a surprise to me in many senses, but I made the leap because, like many of my fellow citizens, I was jaded and I was cynical about the state of our public institutions and what was happening to them. I was attracted to public life by a political party and a leader

who promised to put the people's interest first.

This is a very important landmark step that we are making in our promise to provide open government. The charge we are giving our fellow citizens, whoever they may be — those who will comprise the assembly — is indeed, as other members have stated, a serious one. The right to vote is one that was hard won, it was hard fought, and it has been hard defended over many, many years. In fact, it is a right, as we know it, that stretches back in my culture 400 years. Four hundred years ago or more, my forefathers fought a civil war to establish the right of the people to govern themselves under the guidance, not the rule, of the monarch. It is why we sit here in this chamber two swords' length apart. That is a result of the civil war. It is a right that I think about every time I enter this chamber.

Four hundred years later in our corner of the world we are now going about asking how our right to vote should be exercised and how, in effect, we govern ourselves. I know that there are many examples of different voting systems and democratic systems based on British or French or American models. I am sure the assembly will examine proportional representation in all its forms. It will examine runoff votes. It will examine first past the post and others.

But at the end of the day, I really hope the assembly will look at stability of governance and how any proposals they may develop affect the stability of how we govern ourselves, because voting mechanisms can affect and have affected that important part of this institutional structure.

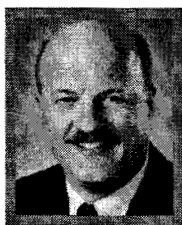
The time will come for discussions on technical issues, and I can assure you and my colleagues that I intend to

submit my views, which I hold quite strongly, and I hope other citizens will express their views strongly as well. That's not what this debate today is about, and we could spend an awful lot of time discussing the merits. Indeed, this is why we have a citizens' assembly to talk about those technical issues.

The double majority system that is part of this motion is an important safeguard to ensure that if any changes are recommended, they will be clearly understood and clearly approved by the people.

Mike Hunter

What is important today is that we are breaking a mould in Canada. The citizens' assembly moves this province away from the Meech Lake and Charlottetown we-know-it-all-and-we-will-tell-you-what is best approach to constitutional reform. That approach did not serve this country, did not serve this province. Here the people are going to decide the future of how they will exercise that hard-won right to vote.



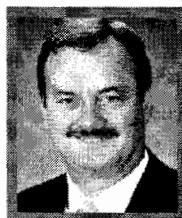
Pat Bell, MLA: We have evolved as a society. We have accepted our current electoral systems and all the history that goes along with them. But no one has actually taken the time or thought to sit down and allow our citizens to decide for themselves what the best electoral system is for governance here in British Columbia.

There are some very exciting parts of this motion. I think the fact that we are engaging all of British Columbia in the process and that every individual who would like to have their thoughts and feelings and emotions about our voting system addressed will have that ability. In fact, I have had many, many individuals already, just in the last 48 hours or so, volunteer to sit on this committee, because they feel that it is such a significant initiative we are taking. I have had to break the bad news to them that, in fact, the citizens' assembly will be selected similarly to the way a jury is selected.

I think it makes a tremendous amount of sense to exclude the people that are closest to the political system. I think we need to open it up to all of our citizenry, especially the individuals that will be impacted by this.

It is a very exciting time. It is historic, in my view. It is something that I am very proud to be part of and that I fully support. I think it is integral to our model of governance. I think it is absolutely critical that we move ahead. This building that we stand in today has been open for about 106 years, and we have not changed our voting system in 106 years. I think the fact that this government is willing to actually have a look at something that will dynamically change the way our representatives are elected is truly a comment on our openness and our willingness to do the right thing for the people of British Columbia, as opposed to the right thing for the politicians that are here.

Make no mistake. Every government before us has had the ability to do what we are doing here today. Every single government that has sat in this particular Legislature for the last 106 years, and the ones going back before that, had the ability to make the decision that the Premier and the Attorney General have delivered on here today, and yet none have been so brave as to do so. I believe that you have to be brave to make the type of decision that we are making here today, because under many of the new voting systems, if they are so chosen, there may be many of us that are not here in the future. You know, if we are doing it for the right reasons — if we are doing it because it provides for better representation — then I think it's the right thing to do, and I fully support that.



Blair Suffredine, MLA: I saw something just a little while ago today that emphasised to me how important people in small communities feel this is. The announcement was only made at noon on Monday of our intention to proceed on this, and already today there was an editorial published in the *Arrow Lakes News* in Nakusp strongly

supporting the concept and suggesting that the citizens' assembly is worth the time and expense. In my view, if people in small communities in a short time frame can quickly recognise how important it is to them, that says volumes as to how much they appreciate government listening.

It is a very bold step. I was one of the members elected to this Legislature with less than 50 percent of the voting majority. Since my election, there have been a number of people who have advocated proportional representation. They ran a referendum of sorts in my riding, and it probably had the strongest number of people anywhere in the province supporting that system of representation. But the question of what the best system is not something we should be telling the citizens assembly. I know they

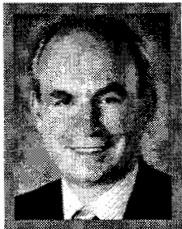
advocate that, because right now we have the system of who gets the most votes, even if that is not a majority.

If we were looking at something like proportional representation, do we then translate that into a statement of: if someone gets 1 or 2 or 3 percent of the vote, do they get 1 or 2 or 3 percent of representation in this House? Is that the natural way of getting a House that can never make those hard decisions? Should we be looking, for example, at a preferential ballot where we get a one, two and three choice? How do we ensure that opposition is heard without paralysing the Legislature?

This Legislature has to, on occasion, wrestle with difficult choices. I was one of the members, as well, who recently went through a recall campaign, and recall there was being used to intimidate members of government to not support the government. The system of voting has to be a fair system that lets that representation occur and encourages members to use their judgement.

What is most important about it is that we restore trust. People around the country, particularly in the small communities that I represent, express a feeling of disenfranchisement. It has been said that there is to be selection based on the same system that the jury system works. Now, as you may know, I attended many a jury trial, and in all the years I practised law, there was only one occasion where a jury was unable to come to a result and that was the first time in the courts in the Kootenays in 45 years that had happened. Simply put, I know the jury system works, and I know this method of selection offers us some strong prospects.

I know it is a risk for me as a member that we are going to change the system, and the system that elected me may not elect me if we change the method of voting. But it is a risk I am willing to take to improve the confidence of all the people who vote in our system and our system of government. Making them feel empowered is the most important thing we can do.



Bill Bennett, MLA: I went on to the Net today just trying to find some information about citizens' assemblies, and I was really surprised at the amount of information from around the world. There are many people around the world today who are con-

cerned about the state of modern democracy.

I think this government's commitment to depoliticize our approach to the citizens' assembly is something that we should be inordinately proud of. Mr. Gibson made several specific recommendations, and then government dealt individually with those recommendations, accepted most of them and made some changes to some of them. I want to refer specifically to some of the recommendations that Mr. Gibson made, which were altered by this government — and I think rightly so — on the basis of principle. I refer specifically to the selection process and also to eligibility. Under the selection process, Mr. Gibson recommended that there ought to be election by peers to raise equality of the constituent assembly membership. Government decided that there would be regional selection meetings, but the selection would be by random sample only, and the reason given for the difference is that voting by peers introduces an element of electioneering into the process and moves away from the random model. I think that is true to the principle that we are following in creating this citizens' assembly.

Mr. Gibson also recommended that one member per riding be selected and then 21 more members be selected from those not initially successful. The government decision was for two citizens' assembly members per riding for a total of 158, and no top-up power for the chair. We really are trying to remove all potential for politics and control, and, I think quite rightly, we are trying to remove any appearance that we have any ideas of a preconceived outcome of this exercise.

I ran into a former member of the Legislature. He was here a number of years ago. In fact, he was a member of cabinet. We met at a social function, and we got talking about the citizens' assembly and this initiative, this commitment that we had made in the *New Era* document under the Premier's leadership. This former member really could not understand why we were doing this. He said to me: "What are you guys doing? You are opening yourself up to a result that you can not control." I told him that that actually is the point of this exercise. We want the people to tell us what they think about how members should be sent to this Legislature.