Why the B.C. Citizens Assembly recommends the single transferable-vote system

Jack MacDonald
An Ipsos-Reid poll taken in February 2005 revealed that half of British Columbians had never heard of the upcoming referendum on electoral reform to take place on May 17, 2005, in conjunction with the provincial election.

Randomocracy

Of the half who had heard of it—and the even smaller percentage who said they had a good understanding of the B.C. Citizens Assembly’s recommendation to change to a single transferable-vote system (STV)—more than 66% said they intend to vote yes to STV.

Randomocracy describes the process and explains the thinking that led to the Citizens Assembly’s recommendation that the voting system in British Columbia should be changed from first-past-the-post to a single transferable-vote system.

Jack MacDonald was one of the 161 members of the B.C. Citizens Assembly on Electoral Reform.
RANDOMOCRACY

A Citizen’s Guide to Electoral Reform in British Columbia

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Randomocracy

An invented word, an obvious neologism, made up for fun. It can be spelled either randomocracy or randemocracy—to reflect the combined concepts involved in the study of democracy through the process of the B.C. Citizens Assembly, the participants of which were chosen through a random selection procedure.
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As we move closer to British Columbia’s referendum on electoral reform—which will be held in conjunction with the May 17, 2005 provincial election—I get the sense that many people would like to understand what the issues are. Voters want to know what the implications of voting yes or no to the single transferable-vote system (STV) might be, but people can’t find enough information to allow them to get their minds around those issues.

Many of those voters are likely feeling the same kind of puzzlement and confusion that my fellow Assembly members and I felt a year ago. None of us considered ourselves to be very knowledgeable about electoral systems. And none of us today, I’d venture to guess, would claim to be experts, although we will lay claim to having learned a lot in a relatively short period of time. We worked through, and reached a conclusion about, the issues because we were given the luxury of participating in the wonderfully conceived process that was created for us.

Much credit should go to Premier Campbell and his government, for carrying through on their election commitment to create the B.C. Citizens Assembly on Electoral Reform, and for choosing Jack Blaney to chair the Assembly. Even more credit should go to Jack Blaney for creating the process he did, for assembling the staff he did, and for his exceptional skills as a facilitator in bringing a group of disparate British Columbians together around the complex issue

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS
of electoral reform. But most of the credit goes to each and every one of my fellow Assembly members who dedicated hundreds of hours to this effort over the course of almost a full year. I have not singled out any particular Assembly member, because I would want to mention all of them. Each member contributed in many ways to this decision and each of them played a role in shaping the final result.
In November 2003, I was very pleased to be randomly selected as one of the 160 members of the B.C. Citizens Assembly on Electoral Reform. Pleased because I have always had an interest in politics and government—dating back as far as my days as both an undergraduate and graduate student decades ago. And pleased because I spent close to three decades of my career working in government—both in Ottawa and Victoria—before my retirement in 2002.

I thought I possessed a fairly good understanding of the electoral system we have had in Canada for many decades, as well as a more rudimentary knowledge of systems in place in a few other countries, but most particularly the United States.

The 160 ordinary British Columbians on the Citizens Assembly were given the unprecedented opportunity to spend almost a year focusing on a single and important, question: what system should British Columbians use to elect their legislators. And, although I speak only for my own experience, I am writing this because I have found in discussions I’ve recently had with friends, neighbours and former colleagues, that many British Columbians are now in the position I was in in the spring of 2004: just having heard about this rather odd-sounding single transferable-vote system (STV) and not knowing quite what to make of it.
I don’t recall having heard of the STV before it was presented to the Citizens Assembly in March 2004. Quite frankly, I was a bit dubious after having heard about it during the course of a series of briefings provided to the Assembly by academic research advisers and visiting academic experts from New Zealand, the United Kingdom and other parts of Canada.

As the Citizens Assembly continued its work through the spring and summer of 2004, listened to and read submissions from hundreds of British Columbians, and then resumed formal hearings in the fall of 2004 to make a decision, I had the opportunity to become much more familiar with the various options that were available for British Columbians to choose from. During this process, I became increasingly familiar with the two major alternatives that the Assembly identified for very serious consideration. The debate within the Assembly had become focused on a choice between the so-called mixed-member proportional system (MMP) currently in place in Germany and New Zealand, and the single transferable-vote (STV) system used in parts of Australia, the Republic of Ireland and Malta.

Despite my initial skepticism about it, I found myself becoming more and more intrigued by the STV option as a viable choice for British Columbians.

Following formal delivery to the public and the provincial government in December 2004 of the Assembly’s recommendation that the province adopt the STV option, some media attention was given to the report, but public discussion pretty much died off through the winter. The shape of the political debate will undoubtedly grow more and more heated as the election and referendum date nears. My concern is that in political debate heat often produces more smoke than light. The louder and more partisan the debate becomes, the more confused and frustrated it will leave fair-minded voters who would like to cast their referendum ballot with a sense that they really understand what the issue is, and what their vote might mean.
An Ipsos-Reid poll of British Columbians issued on February 21, 2005 indicated that half of the respondents had never even heard about the upcoming referendum on the electoral system. Of the half who had heard of it, two thirds said they knew “very little” or “nothing” about the recommended option. On the bright side of this—if there is a bright side—more than half of those who indicated a voting preference on the referendum said they were inclined to support the recommended change. The yes-STV numbers led the no-STV numbers by a two to one margin.

More interesting still, of the half of the respondents who were aware of the referendum and the issue, 34% thought they knew “a fair amount” and 3% said they knew “a lot” about the Citizens Assembly-recommended STV option. Among this group, the yes-vote outnumbered the no-vote by a three to one ratio (66% yes, 23% no).

As Kyle Braid of Ipsos-Reid stated: “It’s all about education at this point.”

It’s with this background in mind that I set down here the evolution of my own thinking about this issue, and try to reconstruct the path that led me to vote in favour of putting the BC-STV option on the May 17, 2005 ballot. My hope is that this account can form part of the broader education effort that is so clearly needed if British Columbians are to make the most of the history-making opportunity they have on the coming Election Day.
On provincial Election Day in 1996, I was having lunch with a friend in the B.C. government when we spotted two other colleagues—one a then-current Deputy Minister and the other a former Deputy Minister. The election that had seemed earlier in the campaign to be something of a shoo-in for the Liberals under the leadership of former Vancouver Mayor Gordon Campbell, appeared to be quite a bit closer. There was still a feeling that the NDP were on their way out and Campbell’s Liberals on their way in. The former Deputy Minister was openly expressing his confidence that the Liberals would win the election and he would be back in a senior role in government within weeks.

That night, the Liberals received a considerably higher number of votes than did the NDP. But the NDP won more seats and retained power with a narrow majority in the Legislature. The NDP had changed leaders a few months earlier with centrist Mike Harcourt being replaced by Glen Clark, a young, smart and articulate career politician who had run a sharply partisan and effective campaign. The next five years of NDP government were increasingly turbulent and by the end of a second five year mandate, the NDP had seen the resignation of Clark, his replacement first by interim leader Dan Miller, and then by former Attorney General Ujjal Dosanjh.
**2001 Election: Opposition Wiped Out**

In June 2001, the election of Campbell’s Liberals seemed nothing short of a sure bet. And, sure enough, 57% of the votes cast went to B.C. Liberal candidates—an absolute majority of votes for a single party for the first time in half a century. But that decisive margin—impressive and decisive as it was—translated into an overwhelming landslide in terms of seats in the Legislative Assembly. The Liberals 57% of the votes resulted in them electing all but two of the 79 seats in the Legislature—basically wiping out the NDP and almost obliterating the traditional parliamentary role of an official opposition.

**The Birth of the B.C. Citizens Assembly on Electoral Reform**

Prior to the 2001 election, Campbell’s Liberals promised to set up a review of the electoral system—understandably, given that his party had failed to win the 1996 election, despite the fact that they won the most votes.

To Premier Campbell’s credit, he carried through on that commitment following his overwhelming election in 2001—despite the fact that the electoral system worked very much to his advantage by exaggerating his margin of victory in terms of elected MLAs.

In a very real sense, these two elections in B.C.—in 1996 and 2001—demonstrated one of the major flaws with the first-past-the-post (FPTP) electoral system that B.C. shares with the rest of Canada, and much of the British Commonwealth. The electoral system is structured in a way that distorts the relationship between ballots cast by voters and seats won in a legislature. The most common distortion is for the percentage of seats won by the winning party to be proportionally larger than the percentage of votes cast for the winning party—electoral strength is magnified by the FPTP system. Sometimes, though, the vagaries of outcomes result in the election of wrong winners, as was the case in B.C. in 1996.
These sorts of distortions are not unique to British Columbia’s experience. Indeed, other electoral jurisdictions using the FPTP method of elections have witnessed similar outcomes. Exaggerated majorities have been fairly common, with the high watermark achieved in New Brunswick in 1987, when Frank McKenna’s Liberals won every single seat in the Legislature. And in Québec, the Parti Québécois was reelected to power in 1998, despite receiving fewer votes than the Liberal Party of Québec.

So the B.C. Liberal government, following its election in 2001, carried through on its commitment to create the B.C. Citizens Assembly to examine the electoral system. The Assembly would make a recommendation as to whether the FPTP system should be kept, or whether British Columbians should be presented with an alternative.

**Electoral Reform, in Canada and Around the World**

While it may have been triggered by recent electoral events in B.C., such a promise to reexamine the electoral system was not unique. Ontario, Québec, New Brunswick and Prince Edward Island had also begun thinking about whether or not to change provincial methods of electing legislators. In Britain, the Blair government had launched a multi-party commission to examine the electoral system under the leadership of former Chancellor of the Exchequer Roy Jenkins.

Britain had also devolved some legislative authority from Westminster to newly established legislative assemblies in Wales and Scotland, and provided for elections to those assemblies to be held under systems similar to those in place in Germany. New Zealand, after two referendums, replaced the FPTP system with a German-style mixed-member proportional system.

The collapse of the Soviet empire and decolonization in other parts of the world resulted in the establishment of a number of
new democracies. Many of these new democracies adopted a proportional-representation system such as those in place in parts of Europe.

The highly contentious results of the 2000 United States presidential election also heightened interest in the impact of electoral systems on politics and government.

**B.C.’s Government Lets Citizens Decide**

The way in which the B.C. Government framed its commitment differed dramatically from the exercises previously mentioned. In most other jurisdictions, reviews were handed over to legislative committees, political parties, blue-ribbon panels, retired judges, academic experts—the usual suspects. The B.C. review, however, was to be conducted by randomly chosen citizens. That was a bold departure from the usual way of doing things.

The other distinguishing feature of the B.C. proposal was even more dramatic. If the randomly selected Citizens Assembly actually recommended a change to the electoral system, the government committed itself to putting that recommendation to public referendum, and to implementing the recommended change if it was approved in the referendum.

The combined effect of these two elements established the B.C. experiment in citizenship as unique and unprecedented. It was a courageous decision. It took almost all of the decision-making authority out of the hands of government and handed it directly over to citizens.

So what are British Columbians to make of the process and the recommendation that the B.C. Citizens Assembly came up with? I want to review the issues we as an Assembly examined through the better part of 2004 and want to outline—at least from my own perspective—some of the thinking and analysis that went into
that recommendation. Again, I don’t claim to speak for anyone but myself. And, again, my objective is not so much to persuade people to vote yes to STV, but rather to try to shed some light on the issue in a way that helps inform fair-minded citizens seeking to understand what the recommended option would mean for British Columbia.
It’s important to understand what the Citizens Assembly was mandated to do. The Assembly was not given a blank slate to write on, nor was it given a mandate to recommend on the broad array of issues concerning politics and government.

Its mandate was sharply focused and limited. The Assembly was established in order to “assess models for electing Members of the Legislative Assembly and issue a report recommending whether the current model for these elections should be retained or another model should be adopted.”

The Assembly’s mandate was explicit: while it could assess any number of models, it could only recommend one alternative—not a range of options for people to choose from. And if it recommended an alternative, it had to “describe [it] clearly and in detail”, make sure the recommendation was “consistent with both the Constitution of Canada and the Westminster parliamentary system”, and “take into account the potential effect of [the] recommended model on the government, the Legislative Assembly and the political parties.”

In case there was any remaining doubt about how focused the mandate was, the Order-in-Council establishing the Assembly specified that the assessment of models “must be limited to the manner by which voters’ ballots are translated into elected
members.” In other words, while there may be legitimate concerns about other, related issues such as participation of women, minorities, or youth in politics, or the impact of party discipline in the Legislature, or the method by which political parties nominate candidates for office, or how campaigns are financed, the Assembly’s assessment of models could not result in formal recommendations being made on any of those issues. The sole focus of any formal recommendation that could go to referendum would be restricted to “the manner by which voters’ ballots are translated into elected members.”

**Definition of a Referendum Majority**

B.C.’s Legislature debated and unanimously approved the Citizens Assembly’s mandate in April 2003. A year later, the Legislature also debated and unanimously approved amendments to the Referendum Act to give legal effect to certain critical components of the Citizens Assembly’s mandate: those specifying the level of approval required in the referendum. While the general rule for referendums in British Columbia is that a vote of 50%+1 must be achieved for approval, that rule was altered for any referendum that would be held if the Assembly made a recommendation for change. The bar was raised: the required yes-vote needed 60% of the votes cast for approval. Furthermore, there must be a vote of at least 50%+1 in at least 60% of the individual constituencies in the province.

The rationale given for requiring such a high level of approval was two-fold: that any fundamental change to the electoral system is tantamount to a substantial constitutional change and therefore must have very strong levels of support; and that the interests of the more lightly populated rural ridings should not be overwhelmed by the huge concentration of population in the Lower Mainland. Again, both parties in the Legislature approved these conditions, and the Referendum Act was amended accordingly.
How the Assembly Approached Its Work

The Assembly’s mandate required members to look at the current system and determine whether a recommendation for change should be made. This mandate obviously required Assembly members to think about the strengths and weaknesses of the FPTP system that are seen by most as a key features of the Westminster parliamentary form of government that Canada inherited from Britain. If the Assembly determined that the FPTP system was fine, the Assembly need go no further. If, however, the Assembly identified some weaknesses, then it had to identify other possible options and make a judgment as to whether one or more of those alternatives addressed those weaknesses, while at the same time avoiding the creation of new, even worse, weaknesses.

The Importance of Values in the Assembly’s Decision-Making

The Assembly concentrated its efforts in the spring of 2004 on learning about the various types of electoral systems that exist around the world, and on setting out explicit statements of values or principles for assessing the various systems it had reviewed. At the end of this learning phase, the Assembly approved a preliminary statement to the people of British Columbia. This statement identified local representation and proportionality as two values “it believes are central to the political health of the province’s democracy.”

Values are necessarily general statements and allow considerable room for interpretation when it comes to their application in practice. To me, this enunciation of values was a fundamentally important step. Setting out a statement of values provided, in effect, a framework for analysis of the current and alternative systems and a principled basis for arriving at conclusions and recommendations. From my perspective, these values and issues provided a solid grounding on which the Assembly could base its analysis.
Developing the values, and subsequently applying them to the task the Assembly had been given involved, for me and I’m sure for many others on the Assembly, an iterative process of analysis. On the first level, a review of Assembly members’ experience in B.C. with the current system helped to sharpen the question of the FPTP system’s strengths and weaknesses. But such a review had to go beyond anecdotal or personal preferences in order to be of use. The framework of values allowed our review to be conducted with a clearer focus on the central features and characteristics the Assembly would want to see embodied in an electoral system—whether the status quo or an alternative.

This is not to say that the values came first and the analysis later. The two processes—discussing B.C.’s system and other systems and reflecting on deeper-level values the Assembly sought to define in order to anchor its analysis—interacted and informed each other. The values came more clearly into focus on the basis of the discussions among the Assembly members on what were seen as the FPTP’s strengths and weaknesses and why the Assembly considered them to be strengths or weaknesses.

The Assembly’s reflections on the other systems it was learning about also forced Assembly members to consider what those systems had to offer at a deeper and more principled level. It cannot be said, therefore, that the identification of the values in effect dictated and predetermined the outcome of the Assembly. If the Assembly had developed its understanding of the key values in advance, in isolation, and in theory, such a criticism might be possible. But the values emerged from the Assembly’s discussions about the electoral process and were not imposed on those discussions in a way that foreordained a decision.

**The Three Values**

In its preliminary statement released in the spring of 2004, the Assembly noted that:
“British Columbians in rural areas, and in locations far removed from the heavily populated Lower Mainland region, feel especially strongly that they must struggle to have their concerns heard. It [the Assembly] is sensitive to the reality that for them, a vigorous system of local representation remains a highly valued dimension of their political life. It anticipates that any reformed electoral system would need to maintain an element of effective local representation.”

Effective local representation was identified as the first value of importance to the Assembly. The second value singled out in the Preliminary Statement was that of proportionality, with the Assembly stating its belief that:

“It is important that the outcome of an election, in terms of the distribution of seats in the Legislature, should reflect the expressed intentions of citizens as expressed in their votes. This is the principle of proportionality—seats won should be proportional to votes won.”

As the Assembly reconvened following the summer of 2004, one of the first tasks it undertook was to set out in a more formal way such a statement of values. The input received over the summer and the individual consideration given to the issues by members of the Assembly led to an important debate over and decision on the “basic values which we believe should form the basis of our electoral system.” These included the first two values identified in the preliminary statement and a third value was added: greater voter choice.

The three core values that the Assembly identified in this regard were:

1. Effective local representation.
2. Fair election results through proportionality.
The Assembly’s final report goes on to note that two additional issues “were consistently highlighted in our discussions on choosing an electoral system.” These revolved around:

1. The current imbalance of power between voters and parties.

2. Considerations related to majority, coalition and minority governments.

THE IMPORTANT WEIGHT OF VALUES

From talking to other members of the Assembly, I know that many of them put slightly different weights on the various values. Some Assembly members thought local representation the most important value, others gave this relatively little weight—including it because of the importance attached to it by many members from the rural and northern parts of the province. Some Assembly members thought proportionality was the main point of the exercise, while others believed that enhancing voter choice and reapportioning the relative balance of power between voters and parties was the key point.

My own mental map of the values I wanted to see applied to the analysis resolved itself into a conception of democratic representation, framed as follows:

The composition of the Legislature should fairly reflect the decisions of voters, who, in making those decisions, should have as much choice as possible in casting their vote, and who should be entitled to expect effective, accountable representation on the part of the legislators they elect.

This version is close to and consistent with the formal statement approved by the Assembly, but provided me with what I thought was a more flexible, objective and integrated set of basic principles of democratic representation.
As the Citizens Assembly process unfolded during 2004, I also developed a series of questions for which I would be seeking answers in order to arrive at my own personal decision with respect to the Assembly’s recommendation:

- How well does the current system embody the propositions in my personal version of the definition of democratic representation?

- Are there alternatives that would do a better job at putting into practice the principles that underlie them?

- Even if an alternative electoral system might be seen as preferable in some respects to the status quo, on balance, would replacement of the status quo raise other questions, or pose unacceptable risks to democratic principles, to effective governance, to the standard of living and quality of life that British Columbians seek?

My own view was that the status quo was flawed, but any alternative had to satisfy a burden of proof. This burden of proof was, of course, a balance of probabilities rather than beyond a reasonable doubt because the latter test is impossible to satisfy in the real world, given that there are no facts in the future.

To some, my own version of the values may seem so neutrally pitched as to be uncontroversial, obvious and therefore unhelpful. Indeed, at first glance, one could argue that the current system largely corresponds to my version of the values identified by the Assembly and meets those tests. But the Assembly’s mandate required the Assembly to dig deeper and to probe beyond a superficial first glance and examine those propositions more thoroughly.

**The Three Stages of the Inquiry**

The Assembly’s inquiry can be seen as having three stages, looking at three main questions. The conclusions the Assembly reached
at each of these stages can be the subject of constructive and instructive discussion and debate.

1. Does the current electoral system (FPTP) suffer from any significant defects that would suggest that it should be adjusted or replaced by another system.

Assembly’s answer: yes.

Many people can (and already have begun to) argue that the current system—while imperfect—has served B.C. admirably well over the decades. And, however flawed the FPTP system is, these flaws are outweighed by the advantages the FPTP system brings to B.C.’s political and community life. Change for the sake of change is pointless, if not downright dangerous: ‘if it ain’t broke, don’t fix it’.

2. Is there an alternative electoral system that would address those significant defects in an effective way?

Assembly’s answer: yes.

It can be argued that the Assembly picked the wrong system as an alternative. Instead of the relatively unknown Irish model of a single transferable-vote system, some critics believe the Assembly should have picked something like the New Zealand mixed-member proportional system (MMP). Or, a pure (or more pure) proportional system similar to those in the Netherlands, Israel or Scandinavia. Some people might argue that B.C. should stick with the benefits of single-member constituencies, but enhance the legitimacy of MLAs by opting for a French-style system, in which only the top-two proceed to a second round of voting to determine who has majority support. A variant of this is the alternate-vote system B.C. had in 1952 and 1953, which was similar to what is now called an instant run-off system. Like the French system, the alternate-vote system seeks to determine who has majority support. It does this by getting voters to mark their ballots preferentially, so
the calculation can be done the same day, rather than a week or two later in a separate second-phase election.

3. Does that alternative system carry with it the risks of introducing other significant defects that might be as bad, or worse, than those associated with the current system.

Assembly’s answer: no.

The argument can be made that the STV system, which is a type of proportional system, is more likely to produce more minority or coalition governments, and that this can give fringe parties inappropriately significant clout in the Legislature and the government. In other words, if the current system distorts and magnifies the winner’s support in creating artificial majorities, then the proportional alternatives might distort and magnify the support of minor parties—not in terms of their representation in the Legislature, but rather in terms of their role in and impact on governance.

Another argument heard with respect to this stage of the analysis is that B.C. needs single-party majority governments such as those produced under the current FPTP system in order to get the kind of stable and secure government needed to make the tough decisions that are politically unpopular, but needed to serve the public interest. Other critiques raise the argument that multi-member ridings dilute accountability of MLAs and confuse voters as to who they should approach to solve their problems or hear their complaints. And, of course, many defenders of the FPTP system claim that the STV system is just too complicated for voters to understand.

These are important questions and many voters will want to focus on them in some detail when weighing the issues in the context of deciding whether to vote yes or no to the STV alternative on May 17, 2005. Certainly, the Assembly spent a great deal of time examining
those questions. The next section attempts to lay out some of the factors many of the Assembly members considered in reaching their conclusion in favour of the STV system.
3

THE CURRENT SYSTEM’S (FPTP) STRENGTHS AND WEAKNESSES

FPTP: A first-past-the-post system is one in which the candidate with the most votes—whether a plurality or majority—wins the seat in the Legislature (adapted from the Citizens Assembly’s glossary found in Appendix 2).

For most of B.C.’s, and Canada’s, political history there has been something like a first-past-the-post (FPTP) voting system. This is natural given that Canada’s constitution was explicitly based on the principles of the British system. The FPTP voting system has a number of clear benefits. It’s simple, familiar and understandable to citizens and to voters. A voter goes to the polling booth, puts a mark beside the name of a preferred candidate on the ballot and drops the ballot in the box. The voter then goes home and waits for the count to be made. The candidate with the most votes in the voter’s riding wins and becomes the MLA for the term of that Legislature. Simple. Straightforward. Familiar.

FPTP STRENGTHS

In electing legislators from individual ridings, the FPTP system allows for local representation—in almost all instances, the legislator who represents a riding comes from that riding, lives in that riding and knows a lot about the circumstances and interests of the people who live in that riding. Individual MLAs are identifiable to their electors, and therefore citizens know who to contact if
they have to share an idea, to seek help with a problem, or make a complaint. Citizens can expect that MLA to feel responsible for responding to their needs. And citizens can hold that MLA accountable if he or she doesn’t respond to the needs of the riding, or doesn’t represent its interests effectively in the Legislature.

Often, the FPTP system produces single-party majority governments—even in systems with more than two major parties. This logic, in fact, promotes the development of parties that try to be as inclusive as possible and to represent as many aspects of the diverse population and geography of the province as possible in order to gather the votes they need to reach the critical mass of seats to form government. Many people strongly feel that single-party majority governments are very good things to have: they can make the tough decisions that are sometimes needed in the public interest because they have some security of tenure, and do not constantly have to trim their policies to ensure ongoing support from coalition partners or minority parties in the Legislature.

Furthermore, this concentration of authority promotes a focus for accountability: if the people don’t like the government resulting from a single-party majority, then the voters have clear recourse at the next election to vote the government out and replace it with a different party.

A FPTP system has many strengths. In fact, many who are urging a no-STV vote in the upcoming referendum believe that the FPTP strengths are so considerable, that they clinch the argument. Case closed. No further discussion required. But no system is perfect, so what might be the weaknesses of FPTP? The Citizens Assembly analyzed these from a number of different perspectives.

**FPTP Weaknesses**

What is the relationship between votes and seats under FPTP? The first proposition in the summary of democratic principles that
The Current System’s (FPTP) Strengths and Weaknesses

I developed to help me think through the issues states that the composition of the Legislature should fairly reflect the decisions of voters. Under the current system (FPTP), it seems apparent that this does happen. The candidate who receives the most votes in a riding is elected as that riding’s representative in the Legislature.

It doesn’t take much analysis or knowledge of history to see that this does not end the story. The lack of a close relationship between the distribution of votes cast and the make up of the Legislative Assembly was obvious in the B.C. provincial elections of 1996 and 2001.

In 1996, the wrong outcome was achieved in that the party with the most votes (the Liberals) lost the election, and the party with less support (the NDP) continued in office for five more years with a majority government.

In 2001, the right party won (the Liberals), but the electoral system distorted the results so much that a solid majority of votes for the Liberals practically wiped out the NDP opposition: 58% of the province’s votes were magnified into 97% of the seats in the Legislature.

Similar examples of wrong winners and artificially inflated majorities can be found in other provinces and countries using the first-past-the-post system—a system that is designed in part to foster single-party majority governments, even when the majority of votes doesn’t go to the winning party. In Québec in 1998, the provincial Liberals won the most votes, but the sovereignist Parti Québécois won the most seats and remained the government of Québec for another four years. In New Brunswick in 1987, Frank McKenna’s Liberals won 60% of the votes and the electoral system translated that into 100% of the seats! No opposition members were elected at all, despite the fact that 40% of the ballots were cast for parties other than the winning Liberals.
With the FPTP system the disconnect between votes cast and seats won can be so pronounced that many feel that the FPTP system is fundamentally unfair in its regular distortion of the actual voting intentions of electors. This unfairness is at the root of calls for greater proportionality in electoral systems. In systems that do not use FPTP—most of the systems in existence in the world today—proportionality of results is a fundamental precept, inseparable from, and giving practical meaning to, democratic principles. Many people with proportional-voting systems would express shock at the extent to which the current FPTP system results in votes not being translated into seats.

This analysis of FPTP caused me to sharpen my first proposition of democratic principles, in that it highlighted the point that a crucial element was missing. Instead of simply stating the “composition of the Legislature should fairly reflect the decisions of voters” I was moved to a better formulation that would capture the more specific concept that “the composition of the Legislature should faithfully and accurately reflect the actual wishes of the electorate as expressed through their votes.” In other words, the relationship between votes cast and representatives elected should be more clear and direct. This raises the question of proportionality, or fairness, of results.

The Citizens Assembly’s Recommendations

Fairness of results may be the clearest flaw with B.C.’s current electoral system. The analysis Assembly members conducted on these points led to the strong support for one of the three key values articulated by the Assembly in its final report: fair election results through proportionality. As the report explained:

“Democracy is ‘rule by the people,’ therefore, the results of an election—the number of seats won by each party—should reflect the number of votes each party has earned from
The Current System’s (FPTP) Strengths and Weaknesses

The voters. The results—votes to seats—should be ‘proportional’. No electoral system does this perfectly, but that does not reduce the importance of proportionality. Proportional election results are the fairest election results. The preference of voters should determine who sits in our Legislature. That is fair.”

But more in-depth consideration of the apparently straightforward statement of democratic principles highlighted other problems in the practice of democracy through the first-past-the-post system.

The Question of Wasted Votes

A wasted vote is a vote that does not contribute to the election of a candidate to the Legislature. In a sense, the people who vote for anyone other than the candidate who is elected have wasted their vote.

Some people may see this concept as a little odd. B.C.’s electoral system is geared to making a decision between various candidates and to selecting one person as the winner. It may seem harsh, and a bit whiny, to dismiss the efforts and support going to losing candidates as wasted.

But wasted votes do seem problematic in instances where most of the votes cast don’t go to the winning candidate. The winner receives less—sometimes much less—than a majority of the votes cast, and yet claims a mandate to represent all the people of the riding.

In the 1996 B.C. provincial election, the voters in Peace River South were very divided over who they wanted their MLA to be. Over 12,200 voters cast their ballots. Of these, 3,774 voted for the Liberal candidate. The NDP candidate did a little better, by four votes, receiving 3,778 in total vote. The winning Reform Party candidate swept into office on the strength of having received 3,901 votes—127 votes more than the third-place candidate. The
winner received only 31.9% of the vote. That meant that fully 68.1% of the votes cast did not support the winner. The description of most of the votes as having been wasted seems to have a bit more meaning in circumstances like this. The legitimacy of the winner’s claim to have a mandate to represent the whole riding and the views and interests of all its voters seems, to put it mildly, to be a bit of a stretch.

**The Safe-Riding Conundrum**

But what about circumstances at the other extreme, in ridings where the outcome is so certain even before the votes are cast that many people don’t feel that it’s worthwhile for them to cast their votes. These safe ridings return a party’s candidate election after election, and by solid margins. The MLAs elected in such circumstances have a much more defensible claim to having received a legitimate mandate. But even in landslides, the total vote of the winner rarely exceeds 60%. That means that the views of 40% of the voters don’t get heard in the Legislature and, in a real sense, their votes are wasted.

Such outcomes are inevitable in the kind of single-member constituencies that exist in B.C. The views of the losers are not given as clear a voice as are the views of the winners—no matter the margin by which the riding is won.

**An Argument for Proportional Representation**

The inequality of winners’ voices vs. losers’ voices in the FPTP system is one of the strong arguments made for systems that are designed to produce more proportional results. In such systems, it is more likely that minority views will receive at least some representation in the Legislature—representation that is more in line with the extent of support minority parties receive in the voting booth.
An electoral system using the single-member constituency with the winner chosen by simple plurality—who gets first past the post with the most votes—has resulted in Legislatures with a composition more sharply regionalized than would be the case if a more proportional system of elections were in existence.

**FPTP and Regionalism**

In Canadian federal politics the Liberals consistently receive something like 20% of the votes in Alberta, but have won only one or two ridings for the past 30 years. For the past 14 years, the Conservative party—or its predecessors, the Alliance, Reform and Progressive Conservative parties—have regularly received more than 20% of the votes in Ontario, but the Liberals have returned overwhelming numbers of MPs in the Ontario ridings. In recent elections in Québec, the federal Liberals receive far short of their proportional share of seats as compared to the Bloc Québécois.

It can be argued that the votes for the losing candidates in those circumstances are not only wasted, but it can also be argued that the resulting balkanization of Canadian politics in the House of Commons is harmful to national unity and that the distorting effect of the FPTP system dangerously distorts Canada’s political reality.

In provincial politics, this balkanized representation is much less acute than at the federal level. But there are clear distinctions in the relative balance between political preferences in different regions of B.C. The FPTP system exaggerates those distinctions through its system of electing single members through pluralities. The distinctions between the regions are rooted in the different realities and interests of those regions. One cannot help but think that having a more balanced representation of views from each of the regions might help to nurture more constructive and realistic discussions of those realities in the Legislature than is the case
under FPTP. The current system seems to sharpen the distinctions rather than build bridges between people.

An electoral system that allows for appropriate representation to be given to the minority choices in the various regions would go a long way to reducing the level of wasted votes. The recognition that voting was not a waste of time for many voters might help to increase the public’s level of interest in, and commitment to, the electoral and democratic process in B.C.

**The Question of Real Choices for Voters**

It is quite easy to get your name as a candidate on the ballot under B.C.’s current system. All you need is a few signatures and a relatively modest deposit. It is almost equally as easy to establish a political party under B.C.’s Elections Act. In fact, there are literally dozens of registered political parties in British Columbia right now. Depending on the constituency, there could be dozens of names on the ballot and representing every choice imaginable: from the nominee of each of the large parties to any number of fringe and independent candidates. More than 20 parties ran candidates in B.C.’s 2001 election.

So voters have lots of choice, right? Yes, but the reality of our current electoral system is that voters must weigh their vote both in light of which of the local candidates they think is best suited to represent them in the Legislature, and in the context of their judgment as to which party—which party leader—they would prefer to form the government. In some cases, this twin aspect of the vote poses no problem. For voters who are completely convinced of the need for a certain party or leader to form government, the identity of the local representative of that party is of secondary importance—the voters will cast their vote for the party. Voters who think their local candidate is the best individual to represent them and who also think the party that candidate
belongs to is the preferred choice to form government have the best of all possible worlds.

But, what if a voter has reached the conclusion that the local candidate of their preferred party is someone they can’t support because of either past experience with that person, or because a candidate representing a different party has much more to offer in the way of character, ability, experience?

Or, the flip side of that, what if a voter strongly believes that one candidate is clearly superior to the others, but that same voter opposes some of the key policies or the overall record of that candidate’s party, or objects to the qualities or character of the candidate’s party leadership?

Or, what happens when a voter prefers a particular candidate, or a particular party, but has reached the conclusion that if they vote for their true preference the effect may be to help to elect a person or party the voter can’t abide. The voter then considers voting strategically by voting for a candidate the voter doesn’t really want to vote for, but who the voter feels has the best chance of stopping the outcome they fear most.

In circumstances like these, the actual scope for a voter’s choices is more apparent than real. In addition, while almost anyone can get his or her name on the ballot, the reality of our system is that, in most cases, the race is really between two or three parties, because other candidates lack the money, the organization and the publicity to make much of an impact on the election. In fact, in some ridings the key choice is that of nominee for the dominant party, with the outcome on Election Day—barring extraordinary circumstances—being something of a foregone conclusion. As the saying goes, the dominant party could nominate a fencepost with hair and still win the riding.
ARE MLAS AND GOVERNMENTS MORE ACCOUNTABLE UNDER FPTP?

The theory behind FPTP systems is that voters can hold their MLAs, and their governments, accountable because each riding has a single, identifiable elected representative, whose job is, in part, to represent and fight for the interests of his or her electors in the Legislature and government. Voters know who their MLA is and has access to him or her through an increasingly sophisticated set of communications channels, such as constituency offices, phones, community TV programs, faxes, e-mails and websites.

If from the voters’ perspective the MLA does not do the job satisfactorily, voters have in hand the ultimate weapon for holding their MLA accountable—withstanding their votes at the next election.

But, from the voters’ perspective, this theory of a MLA’s accountability and accessibility often doesn’t quite match up with the experience in real life. While there are MLAs who are renowned for the effort they put into serving the needs of their constituents, other MLAs may be seen as not being devoted to their constituencies. Some MLAs are very much comforted by the fact that they represent safe constituencies and need only spend enough time on keeping in touch with their riding’s issues to ensure that their party organization and core vote is quiescent. It may seem to voters who didn’t vote for their MLA that the MLA is less interested in responding to their requests for assistance. Indeed, some voters in this position may simply not feel comfortable asking for help from a MLA they voted against.

On a larger scale, too, it is a fact of the Westminster parliamentary system that the overwhelming majority of MLAs are affiliated with one of the main political parties. MLAs depend on those party organizations for their nomination, for their election, for their prospects for promotion to and continued membership in cabinet. The reality of the Westminster system is that of party discipline.
That means that members of the caucus, especially the government caucus, are expected to vote the party line in the Legislature when it comes to legislation, policy, program and budget decisions.

Political parties are a critical element of our system and will continue to be a critical element under any alternative that could realistically be imagined for B.C. Political parties are necessary because they bring together like-minded people around a common program, and in so doing, they help voters make choices about the general policy direction they want to see government take, and who voters want to see form that government. The party discipline that is exercised in the Legislature is the means through which those parties deliver the policies and programs backed by voters.

To govern, cabinet requires majority support in the Legislature. This is the fundamental principle of the Westminster parliamentary system. So parties need to elect enough legislators to achieve this majority support and to provide the talent bank from which the cabinet is chosen. The life of a government backbencher in such a system is often not a happy one. While the caucus is an important feature of this system, it’s the members of cabinet who do the heavy lifting of governing. Backbenchers are often not included in determining the crucial decisions they must vote for in the Legislature and then defend to the voters back in their ridings.

From the perspective of the constituent, this tight party discipline often seems to have the effect of turning a MLA into an automatic voting machine, rather than a firebrand fighter for the constituency that sent the MLA to Victoria in the first place. The MLA appears to have been transformed into a mouthpiece for the party line dictated by the cabinet and party brass in the province’s capital.

Come election time, electoral accountability can have devastating effects, for example the 1991 and 2001 provincial elections in British Columbia and the 1984 and 1993 federal elections. But as a tool of accountability, re-directing votes is somewhat blunt and not all that timely.
What about accountability on a smaller scale and in less dramatic circumstances, like when a riding’s MLA appears to have lost touch with the community. Again, there have been many instances when such behaviour resulted in the local electorate giving that MLA the boot in the next election. But in the context of general elections it’s less of a clear-cut process, because of the large array of issues. Voters may be unhappy with the representation they receive, but if their party loyalty is strong, they are unwilling to vote against their MLA for fear of hurting the party. Or, they may feel that their vote, on balance, should be determined by issues other than their dissatisfaction with the incumbent MLA.

Defenders of the current system may well argue that voters should make their decisions “on balance” and in light of the factor or factors that voters consider most important. FPTP supporters may also argue that the issue of party discipline is not so much a question of electoral reform as it is parliamentary reform.

There is considerable merit to this second argument. But to see the question as either electoral reform or parliamentary reform struck many of the British Columbians the Citizens Assembly talked to as wrongheaded: citizens wanted to see both electoral reform and parliamentary reform and viewed each as dimensions of a larger, more comprehensive approach to establishing more effective accountability for MLAs. It’s important to remember that the Assembly’s mandate dealt only with the electoral reform part of the equation.

**The Question of Government Stability and Accountability**

Many people argue against electoral systems that are more proportional in nature on the grounds that elections are not just about electing local representatives. Elections are about electing governments and governments are chosen in order to govern. Governing involves making choices—and sometimes tough choices—in the public interest.
The argument in this connection is about the relative effectiveness of the current and the alternative systems on governance. As such, the arguments are relevant to the balance of strengths and weaknesses of the current system, and on the question of whether the proposed alternative electoral system might, in fact, cause more serious problems than those it is designed to resolve.

Suffice to say, the main points of this strain of argument are relevant to most kinds of proportional representation electoral systems, not simply to the single transferable-vote system recommended by the Assembly. The arguments against proportional representation revolve around the following themes:

• Effective government means taking tough and sometimes unpopular decisions in the public interest, and governments that do not have the parliamentary security that comes with single-party majorities are more prone to the kind of political suasion that militates against effectiveness. Single-party majorities are more likely to occur under FPTP systems than under PR systems.

• Minority and coalition governments—which are more likely to occur under PR than under FPTP electoral systems—are inherently more unstable. There may be more elections, and strategic, long-term governance is driven out by the need to constantly focus on tactical, short-term politics.

• The instability and lack of secure tenure that accompany minority and coalition governments undermines investor confidence, drive up the interest rates that investors demand on government bond issues and discourage investment and job creation that are needed to secure future growth and prosperity.

Rebuttals against the FPTP position run along the following lines:

• There aren’t any convincing arguments based on the experience of jurisdictions around the world that any of these complaints are valid. If the bottom line test of
effectiveness is the delivery of policies and programs that promote wealth, health, human capital growth, standard of living and quality of life, then PR systems are just as effective as FPTP systems.

- The evidence that does exist around instability simply does not support the charge that PR-based systems, including STV, are any less stable than are FPTP systems. Over time, stable coalitions have emerged in many PR systems. Examples can easily be found of very unstable FPTP governments, even in instances when a solid single-party majority government has been elected. In B.C., you need look no further back than to the 2000-2001 and 1990-1991 elections for such examples. The Vander Zalm government elected in 1986 disintegrated in 1990-91, despite having a solid majority in the Legislature. The Clark government elected with a narrow majority in 1996 fell apart in 2000-2001.

The Citizens Assembly’s Conclusion

Recall that part of the focus of the Citizens Assembly was to ask whether the current electoral system suffers from any significant defects that would suggest that it should be adjusted or replaced by another system. This entailed considering the significant strengths and the considerable weaknesses of the plurality vote or first-past-the-post system B.C. has had for the vast majority of its history as a province.

I would never pretend to speak on behalf of any other member of the Assembly. However, I feel confident from the conversations I held over the past year that a vast number of my fellow Assembly members felt the same way on many of these issues, even though we may have reached our conclusions through different routes.

Whatever the route each member of the Assembly took, it is crystal clear that we reached the same destination. On October 24, 2004, the Assembly was formally asked the following question: Do you recommend retaining the current first-past-the-post electoral system in British Columbia?
The Assembly vote was 11 in favour of retaining the current system and 142 in favour of recommending replacing it with something else. Having determined that there was at least a substantial case to replace the current system, the next question was with what?
The Citizens Assembly spent January through March 2004 listening to presentations from experts from Canada, Australia, New Zealand and Britain, and the Assembly members read books, papers and websites that outlined various electoral models around the world. The Assembly members also talked among themselves during plenary and discussion group meetings. More than 300 presentations were made to Assembly members during the 50 public hearings held around the province in the spring of 2004, and 1,600 e-mail and snail-mail submissions were sent to the Assembly throughout the summer of 2004. Many Assembly members did their own research—some of it very intense—and they shared with one another their thoughts, questions, insights, observations and arguments through the Assembly’s private Internet discussion forum.

When I joined the Assembly my knowledge about alternative systems was sketchy. I was aware, in rather vague and general terms, of the nature of proportional representation systems such as those existing in many Western European jurisdictions. I was familiar with the image of Italy as a somewhat chaotic political system under a form of proportional representation, with a revolving door in the Prime Minister’s office since World War II. I had read a little about the Israeli situation, with small parties on the extreme edges of the political spectrum seeming to wield the power to hold more centrist governments hostage in the context of an almost pure proportional-representation system of elections. I

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had heard about recent changes in New Zealand. Also, who could not have been aware of the electoral system’s impact on the results of the American presidential election in 2000—with horror stories of hanging chads in Florida eventually resulting in the final word on who should be president being made by a very controversial decision from the Supreme Court of the United States.

**Examining Electoral Choices**

The Citizens Assembly examined a wide range of options before narrowing its choice to the mixed-member proportional (MMP) and single transferable-vote (STV) alternatives. I want to review some of the options not chosen with a view to laying out the path of analysis that ultimately led to the Assembly’s choice of a single transferable-vote system. I have not included all of the options, leaving out the ones that did not seem to Assembly members to offer a good fit with the British Columbia context. It is also important to remember that the Assembly’s mandate was restricted. The mandate prevented the Assembly, for example, from recommending anything like the American system, with its three branches of government and separate elections of the executive (president) and legislature (congress). This was because any alternative we recommended “must be consistent with both the Constitution of Canada and the Westminster parliamentary system”, the essence of which is responsible parliamentary government—meaning that the executive must have the confidence of the Legislature, and members of the executive are chosen from among the legislators.

**Majoritarian Systems and Preferential Votes**

The Assembly looked at majoritarian systems like the one used in France. In this system all but the top-two candidates are knocked off the ballot after a first vote. Then there is a second-round vote and a run-off election. The main idea of this system is to ensure that the winner has majority support among the voters.
Why Did the Assembly Choose the Single Transferable Vote (STV)?

The preferential vote—or alternative vote—system used for the federal lower house in Australia, and used in B.C. in 1952 and 1953, was also examined. The preferential vote allows voters to rank-order their choices and has a similar effect as the French system. The type of preferential system used in Australia is a kind of instant run-off, because the second round of counting can take place by counting second preferences immediately after the first round is counted—as opposed to holding a second, separate election a week or two later, as in France.

Both the majoritarian and preferential systems have some advantages over B.C.’s current system (FPTP). By providing preferential voting, voter choice is enhanced and voters get a second chance to express their preferences. Such systems also avoid the situation where a legislator is elected with less than 50% of voter support. The winning candidate can claim with some legitimacy that he or she represents the views of the majority of the people in the riding. One could also argue that local representation is enhanced.

The Assembly was not much attracted to either the preferential or majoritarian options because they don’t address the issue of fairness or proportionality. It is not possible to achieve proportional results in single-member ridings, which have existed in B.C. since 1991. Even though there were many multi-member ridings in B.C. during the 1952 and 1953 elections—when preferential voting was used—it would be hard to argue that those results were anything like proportional. The CCF (predecessor of the NDP) won the plurality of popular votes on both the first and final rounds of voting in 1952, but lost the election.

So the majoritarian and preferential voting options appeared to address two out of the three values, or tests, the Assembly had identified as key criteria. But most of the Assembly members concluded that that wasn’t good enough. The third value—more proportionality—was seen to be of indispensable importance in identifying a valid alternative to the status quo.
Randomocracy: A Citizen’s Guide to Electoral Reform

Proportional Representation Systems

If fairness and proportional results were seen as key criteria for judging an electoral system, why not go the whole way and adopt a pure model of a PR system, such as that in place in Israel or the Netherlands?

In Israel, for instance, the whole country is one big constituency. People don’t vote for individual candidates, but for the party of their choice. Each party nominates as many candidates as it wishes, up to the total number of legislators in the Knesset: 120. Seats are apportioned according to the percentage of votes obtained by each of the parties. This is subject to a threshold of 2%, which means that a party that receives less than 2% of the total vote does not get a seat in the Knesset. Any party that does reach this 2% threshold, on the other hand, is guaranteed a seat in the Knesset.

This basic model is similar to the one in place in the Netherlands, although there is no artificial threshold in that country. This means that the 150 seats to be apportioned are awarded on the basis of pure proportionality—a party winning just 1/150th, or 2/3 of 1% of the national vote is entitled to a seat in the Legislature.

A concern expressed by many members of the Citizens Assembly about such systems was the real danger of a splintering of political representation in the Legislature, with many very small, single-interest political parties ending up with one or a few seats. The prospect of such parties holding the balance of power in a minority Legislature troubled many Assembly members.

One response to this concern is to raise the threshold of votes that must be achieved by a party before it is entitled to a seat in the Legislature. As mentioned, the threshold in Israel is 2% of the national vote. Other jurisdictions have higher thresholds, up to 5% in Germany, to guard against too much fragmentation in the Legislature.
A second concern was the amount of power such systems give to party officials who construct a party’s candidate list and determine the order in which candidates’ names appear on the list. The pure-proportional model has closed lists. This means that the party names its candidates in order of preference, and the actual identities of the legislators elected is determined by how far down the list their names appear. If a party is entitled through its share of the votes to 30 legislators, the unfortunate person named as the 31st candidate on that party’s list is out of luck.

This model tightly constrains the choices available to voters, who might prefer the 31st candidate over the 30th, or even the first candidate. Voters have no control over the order of a party’s candidates in a closed-list system. Voters only get to vote for the party of their choice.

So one variant is to provide open lists, whereby voters have the option to either accept the party’s ordering of candidates, or to go into the list and re-order it by singling out candidates appearing lower down on the list according to their preferences. Such an option goes some way in providing more choice and power to individual voters. Where such open-list systems exist, however, the practice in fact seems to be that many, indeed most, voters don’t exercise this choice and end up just voting for the party of their preference.

Many Assembly members believed that the current perceived imbalance of power in favour of parties, as opposed to voters, would likely be made worse by adopting a PR system such as those the Assembly examined. Such systems simply gave too much power over to the party officials who got to determine which candidates go on the list, and in what order.

The third major objection made by the Assembly to adopting one of the variants of a pure proportional representation was the fact that there is no identifiable, individual, locally based legislator for
whom people can vote and who voters can hold accountable. This desire for effective local representation was a strongly held value for many Assembly members, especially those who came from northern or rural ridings.

The Assembly was not very interested in the purer forms of PR because these seemed to fail two of the three criteria. They certainly provided more proportionality, but didn’t offer choice for voters or effective local representation.

**Mixed-Member Proportional (MMP) Systems**

When the Assembly got going, my feeling was that the mixed-member system (MMP) that New Zealand recently adopted was likely to be the most interesting potential alternative. New Zealand was somewhat similar to B.C. because of the size of the population and the British influence on New Zealand’s political system.

Indeed, the mixed-member proportional system did receive a great deal of attention. New Zealand adopted the MMP system a few years ago, following two referendums. The system is modeled to a great extent on the German system instituted following World War II. It’s an attempt to combine some of the best features of the geographically based constituency representation that is one of the hallmarks of the British FPTP system we currently employ, with those of list proportional representation systems such as those in widespread use in Europe.

With the New Zealand MMP system there are individual ridings that elect individual legislators on a FPTP plurality basis—just as we do now in B.C. But in New Zealand voters also get a second vote to choose which party they prefer. This second vote generates additional legislators, elected on the basis of the proportion of the party votes received by each party. This second vote tops up the representation obtained through the individual constituency elections and provides for a remedy to the disproportional results that are often obtained through FPTP alone.
Another advantage of the MMP system is that it allows voters to reflect their political preferences more fully: a voter may like (or dislike) a particular candidate, but dislike (or like) the party that person represents. That voter can mix and match: voting for a candidate and also voting for a different party.

In terms of the three main values the Assembly sought to reflect in their preferred electoral system, MMP maintained local representation through the election of constituency MLAs, enhanced voter choice by providing two votes and provided for more proportional results through the election of list legislators. For these reasons, many members of the Assembly, including myself, very seriously considered the MMP option.

MMP, however, had some shortcomings that became apparent to a number of Assembly members. The Assembly’s mandate was interpreted to mean that it had no authority to recommend an increase in the size of the Legislative Assembly. The Assembly was restricted to making a recommendation on how votes are translated into seats and not on the number of seats in total. To keep a 79-member Legislature and to have enough list MLAs to create a reasonable degree of proportionality overall, the size of the individual constituencies needed to be increased substantially.

While local representation would be retained through single-member constituencies, the geographical size of those constituencies had to be in some cases quite massively enlarged in order to keep the overall size of the Legislature in check. This was seen to be a particular problem in the already geographically huge rural ridings in northern B.C. The Assembly heard many impassioned arguments by its members from rural parts of the province that the ability of their MLAs to provide reasonable levels of representation was already severely hampered by the huge geographical distance and often poor transportation links that exist in the more remote parts of the province. If the size
of the individual constituencies had to be doubled, or tripled, or quadrupled, in order to bring in a MMP system, that would render effective local representation a practical impossibility in the rural areas of the province.

In addition, many Assembly members thought that the balance of power between voters and parties was already too heavily tilted in favour of parties. Introduction of party lists to elect the proportional MLAs seemed to make that imbalance of power worse, not better. The parties would nominate and order the lists. The experience of other jurisdictions with lists was that there was relatively little an individual voter could do to influence which individual candidates actually succeeded in becoming a list MLA. This was especially the case with closed-list systems, but it seemed that the experience with open-list systems wasn’t much better in practice, even though it seemed to be better in theory.

Several Assembly members, myself included, were also concerned about the introduction into the Legislature of MLAs with two different pedigrees. The constituency MLAs and the list MLAs would get there by different routes and have somewhat different duties. A constituency MLA would presumably have to tend to the needs of his or her riding’s voters, whereas a list MLA had no such constituency to worry about directly. The concern was who would have more power and status, the constituency MLA or the list MLA.

On the one hand, the existence of list candidates could enable parties to attract star candidates who might otherwise not be willing to put themselves through the meat grinder that elections at the local level often become. This might be a good thing if it encouraged capable, experienced candidates to get into politics, and it might provide an alternative talent pool for cabinet ministers. It can be argued that the luxury of not having to worry about the day-to-day constituency problems would free up list MLAs to pursue bigger issues in the broader public interest.
On the other hand, the closer connection of the constituency MLA to a body of support in the community he or she represented could be seen as providing a higher degree of political legitimacy and accountability. The long tradition of local representation and the honour attached to representing communities and their interests in the Legislature, is a central feature of B.C.’s legislative tradition. Some of the submissions the Citizens Assembly received went so far as to recommend that the Assembly underline the different status of the two types of MLAs and limit list MLAs to only serving one term in the Legislature, after which they would have to win a constituency seat to continue in office. Similarly, a proposal was made that only constituency MLAs be allowed to serve in cabinet, given their higher degree of political legitimacy and accountability. However, because of the Assembly’s mandate, no such recommendation could be made. It was interesting to see the different views of the importance and legitimacy of the two kinds of MLAs under MMP.

An example that directly related to the idea of two kinds of MLAs that is particularly compelling is the recent political experience in Wales. Early in the Blair government’s term, the British Parliament had devolved certain powers from London to newly established assemblies in Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland. The assemblies created in Scotland and Wales elected their legislators through variants of MMP. The subsequent experience under this system in Wales clearly exposed the fact that the differential status between constituency and list MLAs was becoming a significant problem. So significant, in fact, that the Richards Commission—which reported in the spring of 2004—recommended that MMP be thrown out and be replaced with STV to ensure that legislators would have the same status.

By the time the B.C. Citizens Assembly’s deliberation phase began in the fall of 2004, it was clear that MMP was one of the two leading alternatives to the FPTP system. There had been strong support for the MMP option throughout the spring 2004 public hearings, as well
as in the submissions received via the Assembly’s website. Many of the latter, however, were in the form of one-line e-mails simply indicating support for a New Zealand-like MMP system, and without specific supporting arguments.

For the most part, people who made submissions to the Assembly—including many recommending MMP—went to considerable effort to analyze various factors and laid out elaborate and reasoned arguments in favour of the particular option they were promoting. I paid much more attention to those submissions, although, to be frank, I sometimes welcomed the MMP one-liners because they allowed much quicker progress to be made in ploughing through the 1,600 written submissions.

**Narrowing Down to Two Options**

In the fall of 2004, the Assembly turned its attention to the two main contending voting systems. In order to sharpen and deepen the debate over a final choice, the Assembly took some time to customize versions of MMP and STV for the B.C. situation. As the discussion unfolded, the MMP option was fine tuned to address problems previously identified by Assembly members. The most important features the Assembly included in the MMP variant it developed were designed to enhance voter power and choice by providing for open and not closed lists, and for preferential voting for the individual constituency seats. In an attempt to address at least some of the concerns about effective local representation, the Assembly recommended that the list seats be allocated on a regional basis.

There was also considerable discussion about the ratio between constituency and list seats. The higher the number of constituency seats, the less expansion required in the geographical size of those seats. But there is a direct and negative impact of such a system’s ability to deliver a reasonable degree of proportionality. In the end, the Assembly recommended a ratio of four list seats to six
Why Did the Assembly Choose the Single Transferable Vote (STV)?

constituency seats, because a 40% threshold of list seats was considered to be the minimum required to make a meaningful degree of proportionality possible.

In summary, the MMP variant designed by the Assembly was an attempt to balance the three key values:

1. Setting the ratio of constituency to list seats in an effort to maintain a reasonable degree of local representation with a reasonable degree of proportionality.

2. Breaking the list seats into regional subsets to try to address some of the dilution of local representation that would accompany the vast enlargement of individual constituencies that would be required under MMP.

3. Introducing, wherever possible, voter choice into the system in order to mitigate the increased authority that parties would otherwise receive through the introduction of a party-list component.

Why the Citizens Assembly Didn’t Choose the MMP Variant

In my final analysis, I believe that the MMP variant that the Assembly designed collapsed under the weight of trying to be too many things to too many people. In a real sense it combined the worst aspects of the two systems, rather than the best. The size of the constituencies would still have had to be massively increased, which I knew would trouble many members, and did nothing in my estimation to improve the accountability of local MLAs that was seen to be so important. The introduction of choice for voters on both the constituency and list sides of the equation, I thought, was unlikely to diminish in practice the increased power of parties vis-à-vis voters through introduction of lists.

A change to open lists also ran the risk of actually undermining one of the other features of lists that some people had proposed: that through the lists, parties could ensure that traditionally
underrepresented groups were better represented in the Legislature. This outcome might be more likely achieved with closed lists, assuming that the party in question placed the names of candidates from underrepresented groups high enough on the list. But, the introduction of open lists might undo that potential benefit in promoting more proportionality in the broader sense.

As the Assembly worked through all these issues through September and October 2004, it became clear that the two questions members of the Assembly had to weigh were:

1. Was there a reasonable and effective balance achieved among the three key values in the variant of MMP the Assembly developed?

2. In addressing the three key values, how did the MMP variant stack up against the STV option?

**Single Transferable-Vote System (STV)**

As mentioned earlier, when the single transferable-vote system was described to the Assembly in the spring of 2004, my first reaction was one of only very mild interest and quite a bit of skepticism. By the time the final decision was made on October 23, 2005, I was one of the very strong majority who wound up supporting this odd-sounding STV system that was based on the Irish model.

To explain how this happened—at least in my case—it is necessary to outline the main features of STV, and review those features against the three key values the Assembly had identified. It also seems necessary to respond to two of the questions that are often raised about the Assembly’s choice:

1. Isn’t STV too complicated to be understood by voters?

2. If STV’s so great, why isn’t it used more widely around the world?
The single transferable-vote system was developed in late nineteenth century Britain by electoral reformers troubled by some of the shortcomings they saw in the voting system of the era. Since then, it has found favour with a number of people who have studied electoral systems, but it has only been introduced in a relatively small number of jurisdictions.

In Ireland and in Malta, STV was left as a legacy by departing British administrations. It has been in effect in both of those jurisdictions for over 80 years. In Ireland, governments have twice attempted to convince the people to replace it with another system. And twice, in referendums, the people of Ireland have voted in favour of keeping the STV.

In essence, the STV system has the following key features:

- Voters can express their preferences for the various candidates on the ballot.
- Each constituency is represented by several legislators, rather than a single member.
- There is a mathematically derived quota of votes required for election of each legislator.
- Each voter has one vote, but that vote is both transferable and divisible.

These features differ from the present voting system in British Columbia. Because of these differences, the STV system is unfamiliar and appears strange and complicated. But each of the features is based on a policy rationale that merits consideration.

The principle of each voter having a single vote seems the least unfamiliar to British Columbians. ‘One person, one vote’ is one of the basic principles of democracy—although it was a long time coming and is still, in some respects, imperfectly applied in practice. For instance, it takes many fewer rural votes to
elect an MLA than it does urban votes to do the same because of the vast size and low population density in B.C.’s north and rural areas. Despite this imbalance—which is common across Canada—the Supreme Court of Canada has ruled that there is considerable leeway possible within the concept of equality in the Charter. As long as constituencies are within 25% more or less than the average population size, they are constitutionally allowable—notwithstanding the fact that this gives a lot more electoral clout to a rural voter than an urban one. This is to balance the overwhelming dominance of urban population over rural population, that in a world of perfect voter equality would run the real danger of obliterating rural voices and interests in the legislatures of Canada.

The concept of preferential voting may be familiar to some older British Columbians, although it was only used in B.C. in the 1952 and 1953 elections, and then abandoned after W.A.C. Bennett took office with a majority in the Legislature following the 1953 vote. The idea behind preferential voting is that voters can rank-order the candidates on the ballot, instead of simply marking an ‘x’ against the name of a single candidate, as is the case with the current system.

Multi-member constituencies may be more familiar to somewhat younger British Columbians. It was only following the 1986 provincial election that the last two-member ridings were abolished. In every election between 1871 and 1986 at least some ridings had more than one member. In the earlier part of the twentieth century, Vancouver was represented by a six-member constituency, and Victoria was represented by a six-member riding.

While these features may strike a chord with a few British Columbians, the way they function under STV is quite different from any system that has been tried in B.C. While there have been quite a few multi-member ridings in B.C., the larger, rural ridings
were always represented by a single member. Voters in the multi-
member ridings in B.C. had more than one vote and could mark
an ‘x’ against as many names as there were members to be elected
from that constituency. In this sense, it was a system more like that
of choosing school board members or city councilors. And, while
there was preferential voting in 1952 and 1953, the aim of that
system was to determine who had majority support more along the
lines of the current Australian system.

**How Is STV Different**

STV differs markedly from electoral systems previously in place in
B.C., and the key difference is that each voter only gets one vote,
despite the fact that the constituency is represented by more than
one member. This is where the Droop quota comes in.

To be elected, a candidate must receive a certain number of votes,
derived by applying the Droop quota. The required quota is determined
by means of a formula named after its developer, the British
mathematician and lawyer, Henry Richmond Droop (1831-1884).

The policy principle underlying the Droop quota is that it allows
for the election of the candidates whose support in the riding is
the widest and deepest. Stated more formally, the quota is the
mathematical minimum number of votes that can be won only by
the number of candidates to be elected in that riding, and no more.
If there is a five-member riding, for example, five and only five
candidates can mathematically achieve the quota. It is impossible
for a sixth candidate to get that number of votes. The formula is
described as follows:

\[
\text{Number of valid votes} \div (\text{Number of seats} + 1) + 1
\]
There are other quotas that could be used. The Hare formula—another common quota—is simply the result of the number of valid votes being divided by the number of seats.

The Assembly chose the Droop quota because it wastes fewer votes. More votes, or parts of votes, are used to elect the legislators from a constituency than would be used with the Hare formula.

**How Is a Vote Transferable Under STV**

Anyone familiar with party leadership conventions will find one aspect of this easy to understand. If there is no winner on a leadership vote, the candidate with the lowest support is eliminated from the next ballot. In effect, the supporters of that losing candidate can move to their next preference. This is exactly the same thing that happens under STV, except that a second ballot is not required. If not enough votes are received to reach the quota, the candidate with the lowest total of votes is eliminated, and his or her votes are transferred to the second preferences of those voters. There is therefore more chance that this vote will help to elect a legislator, as opposed to being wasted as is now the case in B.C.

**How Is a Vote Divisible Under STV**

At the other end of the spectrum, what happens if a candidate is so popular that he or she receives more votes than required by the quota? The answer to this question explains why it can be said that the single vote can be both transferable and divisible. This, to be sure, is the part of the description of the STV system that seems most difficult to explain in a few words. In basic terms, the surplus votes (the votes above what a candidate needs to reach the quota) are divvied up among the voters’ second preferences on the basis of a transfer value. This ensures that the maximum value is extracted from as many votes as possible, while also ensuring that the principle of ‘one person, one vote’ is maintained.
The Appeal of STV

So what was it about the STV system that appealed so strongly to the Citizens Assembly?

1. STV puts a premium on voter choice and enhances the power of voters as opposed to that of parties.

2. Multi-member ridings, combined with preferential voting, results in fairer, more proportional results among parties.

3. The fact that candidates must pay close attention to voters because they are seeking not only first preference votes, but also second preference, means that voters have a better chance of receiving more effective local representation.

4. Not only do voters have more choices of candidates to vote for, but they also have a greater choice of MLAs to hold accountable for the constituency’s interests. Because of proportionality, it is more likely that a citizen will find an MLA who is more in tune with the citizen’s thinking and values, than is the case in a single-member constituency.

5. The Droop quota is a significant enough threshold to avoid the prospects of a very fragmented legislature with many single-interest micro-parties.

6. It is more possible for independent candidates who have broad and deep support in a riding to be elected, thus enriching the representation in the Legislature.

Seeking a Balance Between Women and Men in Politics

The Assembly members took seriously the question of the underrepresentation of women and minorities in politics. The issue was discussed at considerable length and was seen as a significant factor by many Assembly members in determining their final conclusions about the key issues.
One of the major design features of the Citizens Assembly was the equal representation of men and women in the Assembly’s membership. This was a decision taken by cabinet, and differed from the original recommendation made by Gordon Gibson, who was commissioned by the Government to help it figure out how to implement the platform commitment to set up an Assembly. Gibson’s very thoughtful and comprehensive report recommended that there be one representative randomly selected from each riding, for a total of 79 Assembly members. Cabinet wanted to double the total number in an effort to increase the likelihood that the membership of the Assembly would accurately reflect the demographics of the province. Cabinet added the unexpected proviso that each riding should be represented by one man and one woman, who would be randomly selected.

Within the Assembly there was considerable discussion as to why women are so underrepresented in elected politics. While the numbers of women in elected politics has increased over the past few decades, the Legislature is still very much a male-dominated institution.

Many people within the Assembly explained the male-female imbalance in politics in terms of the differential distribution of responsibilities in society and the tremendous toll that political life takes on families, which still remain largely the responsibility of women. Others argued that the adversarial, confrontational nature of partisan politics as practised in the province discouraged women from participating. The harsh, personal tone of much political discourse was seen as something that few women wanted to engage in, preferring instead to work in a climate where a more cooperative, consensus-building approach to decision-making was the norm.

Most Assembly members agreed that it would be a good thing if more women were elected to office. The question was whether changes to the electoral system could achieve this, and, if so, which electoral system might offer the best chance of improving women’s participation in politics.
Many members of the Assembly were attracted by the argument that a MMP system would do more to advance the issue of women’s involvement in politics, because parties could ensure that more women (and other underrepresented groups) could be placed on the candidate list. Some closed systems have developed processes of “zippering” the list—alternating women and men candidates—to try to ensure a more balanced representation.

But several women on the Assembly reacted negatively to the idea that special measures should be put in place to increase the representation of women, seeing such an approach as condescending and patronizing. Their argument was that they wanted the best people to be their MLAs, and that gender was simply not a relevant factor. Qualified and dedicated women should be encouraged to run, to be sure, but so should qualified and dedicated men. There was much discussion on this point, with others on the Assembly taking the view that such a perspective was perfectly valid, in theory, but the problem was that the current reality puts women at a significant disadvantage from participating, and the current political culture is antithetical to encouraging the participation of women.

The topic of fair representation of underrepresented groups was of such interest and importance to many Assembly members that the Assembly asked to receive expert advice. A leading academic authority, who had written extensively on such topics, was brought in from Alberta and presented the results of her studies to the Assembly. The bottom line of this evidence was that the solution was not so much a matter of which electoral system was chosen. Any real impact would only come about as a result of changes to party practices, which were outside the Assembly’s mandate, and more generally, on changes to the political culture.

It is true that there is much better representation of women in politics in many proportional systems, like in Scandinavia. It is also true that representation of women in politics in Ireland is not
so good. Australia, which uses STV in its Senate elections, does much better on this score. And Tasmania, an Australian state that uses STV in its elections, does better still—and much better than Canada. But the advice the Assembly received was that the differences in results were not attributable to the electoral system, but to the other factors mentioned above.

On balance, the relative impact of choosing either the MMP or the STV routes did not appear to be a significant factor. The experience of other jurisdictions in this regard had limited applicability, given that the key factors in explaining differential results in terms of representation were questions related to political and social culture in those jurisdictions, not the electoral system in and of itself.

**The Citizens Assembly’s Recommendation**

After going through all this learning, listening, talking and debating, members of the Assembly thought long and hard about the various alternatives available and examined each alternative in some detail against the key values they had identified as tests. The Assembly came to a very clear and decisive conclusion that on balance the STV approach offered a better response to those values.

STV increases the likelihood of a fair and more proportional outcome of elections, where the seats in the Legislature are more closely aligned to the actual support for candidates and parties. STV shifts the balance of power between voters and parties in favour of voters—giving a significantly greater array of real choice to voters. STV maintains a clear means for providing local representation and actually makes those representatives more accountable—in practical ways—to the voters in their constituency. In terms of its consistency with key democratic principles, STV constituted a significant improvement over the current system. MMP supporters argue that, when compared to the current system (FPTP), MMP also represents a significant improvement in terms of its embodiment of democratic values. And many Assembly
members would agree. But the majority of the Assembly concluded that the STV option did a better job of improving the democratic features of our electoral system than did MMP. And STV did so in a way that avoided some of the problems they saw with the MMP option.

I could have supported an MMP option, but concluded that the STV option was better for British Columbians. Some of the features of the MMP system the Assembly developed appeared to be unreasonable facsimiles of choice, and I saw STV to be a more internally consistent and integrated solution to balancing the three values.

On October 23, 2004, the Assembly held its formal plenary discussion on which of the two alternative systems it should recommend. By a vote of 124-31, the Assembly voted in favour of STV over MMP as the chosen alternative to present to British Columbians, if a final decision were to be made to present any alternative.

This final decision would entail determining whether—in light of all the factors and considerations—the Assembly would actually choose to recommend that British Columbians be presented with an opportunity to decide between STV and the status quo (FPTP) in a referendum on May 17, 2005.
Having gone through the analysis of B.C.’s present voting system and weighing its strengths and weaknesses, the Citizens Assembly decided that there was reason to give serious consideration to replacing the FPTP system with an alternative system. A selection was made from among a range of alternative systems available and the STV system was determined to be the preferred choice among members of the Assembly. The final stage of inquiry required that the Assembly make sure that the alternative system did not carry with it risks of introducing other significant defects that might be as bad or worse than those associated with the current system. The question was, in effect, might the cure potentially be worse than the disease?

Even at the best of times, governing is difficult. To govern well, to have effective government, there must be a certain amount of stability and security on the part of the governing body. What this boils down to is that one of the features that critics see as a flaw of the FPTP system—the magnification of support for plurality parties through the creation of artificial majorities—is viewed by FPTP supporters as one of the key benefits of the current system. FPTP proponents believe that it’s the production of single-party majority governments that provides the very kind of stability and security of tenure that is required for governments to make those sometimes tough and politically unpopular decisions in the public interest. And, that a government reliant on uncertain support from
shaky coalition partners, or a government operating in the context of a minority parliament, can’t realistically be expected to put the strategic, long-term public interest ahead of a coalition or minority government’s tactical, short-term partisan political interests. This is because secondary coalition parties or opposition parties don’t carry the full burden of government responsibility on their shoulders and can afford to play politics to the disadvantage of the lead party in the government.

According to FPTP proponents, STV is likely to give the public a weak-kneed, tactical, politically driven government that doesn’t have the backbone or stability to do what governments are meant to do: serve the best interests of the public at large.

A variant of this anti-STV argument is that minority and coalition governments are inherently unstable, and therefore, government takes a permanent back seat to politics. Coalition and minority governments might fall apart at any time because the government caucus is not sufficient on its own to retain the confidence of the Legislature. If this happens, political uncertainty and confusion might be an ongoing condition and affect party discipline, which forces the government caucus to be reliably united in order for government to be stable. In fact, party discipline is a central feature of parliamentary democracy as it has evolved over the past century in British-type systems such as B.C.’s.

It is argued that the more unstable nature of minority or coalition governments undermines the confidence of business people and investors who rely on stability and predictability to make the big investment decisions that are so important to the future of the province. If given a choice, business people and investors would rather take their capital, their technology and their intellectual property, and invest or set up businesses in a jurisdiction where the investment conditions will be predictably stable for some reasonable period of time. If a jurisdiction is seen as politically unstable or unpredictable, the big national and international bond-
rating agencies that do due diligence on behalf of big investors will downgrade a region's rating. The consequences of a lower rating are costly. Investors will either take their capital elsewhere, or, if they don’t, they will extract a premium in terms of the interest rate the citizens must pay on the bonds those investors buy which help to fund schools, universities, hospitals and highways.

The loss of business and investors and its effects on the community are serious considerations and serious issues. That is why many members of the Citizens Assembly looked very carefully at the question of stability of government. What evidence is there to support the proposition that systems encouraging more proportional representation—including STV—lead to less stability, weakened investor confidence and government’s reduced capacity to make decisions that result in higher standards of living and quality of life for citizens?

**A Second Look at Government Stability**

It is generally theorized that proportional voting systems are more likely than FPTP systems to result in the election of minority parties and—in the case of STV—Independents. But using a STV system, Ireland has had majority governments for 60 of the past 80 years, and its more recent history of coalitions has proven to be both quite stable and effective. Malta has also had majority governments for most of its post-colonial history. Other countries that use proportional systems—like some in Europe—have had relatively stable coalition governments over many years. There is little evidence of the kind of weak or unstable governments that critics of proportional representation point to.

Perhaps it should not be too surprising that over time the emergence of stable coalition governments promotes stability in policy direction as well. The so-called policy swings introduced by changes of ideologically opposed parties who replace one another in government is, if anything, more commonly found in some FPTP
systems than in PR systems with stable coalitions. The average time between elections under stable coalition systems is not significantly shorter than under B.C.’s current system, despite the fact that B.C.’s current system creates artificial majorities that can prolong government’s tenure in office to the constitutional limit.

The fact that big parties in B.C.’s system are, in large measure, brokerage parties that bring together various political factions under a single umbrella, makes these parties similar to the coalition governments that are formed in some of the proportional systems. One difference is that the deals among informal coalition partners within the big parties under the FPTP system are made behind the closed doors of party organizers or in the caucuses. In more proportional systems with formal coalition governments, a larger part of the deal making is done in the open, with the parties stating explicitly what they need in order to be part of the coalition. Negotiating more openly gives those coalition partners whatever political credit is attached to seeing their key agenda items advanced.

In British Columbia, as noted earlier, the presence of single-party majority governments has not guaranteed stability. In 1990-91, the Social Credit government, (often viewed as a kind of coalition of federal Conservatives and Liberals) disintegrated despite having a solid majority in the Legislature. The NDP government elected with a majority in 1996 fell apart in 2001.

In addition, many British Columbians who talked with the Citizens Assembly were troubled by the ‘yo-yo’ politics in the province: the hallmark of a change in government being fundamental changes in policy direction. This kind of policy uncertainty or instability was seen as problematic in terms of encouraging steady progress in developing the province’s future.

In fact, such policy whiplash was seen by many British Columbians who talked with the Citizens Assembly as a serious hindrance to
the province’s reputation as a stable jurisdiction. This is ironic, given that some critics of STV, or any other proportional system, make the case that single-party majorities are strongly preferred by the investor and business community, and that B.C.’s economic development prospects are put at risk by switching to a system under which it is less likely that single-party majorities will be the norm.

**The Question of Governance: Making Tough Decisions in the Public Interest**

It seems instructive to search for evidence on the point of investor confidence. One key indicator of investor confidence is the bond rating given to jurisdictions by the big rating agencies, like Moody’s or Standard and Poor’s. These bond ratings are important, because they determine the interest rate that bond issuers must give to bond investors. The higher the risk, the worse the bond rating, and the worse the bond rating, the higher the interest rate that must be given to investors. So a poor bond rating costs taxpayers money, because their tax dollars go to pay higher interest to the foreign investors who buy the province’s bonds. B.C. needs to issue bonds to pay for crucial infrastructure in the province—hospitals, schools, post secondary institutions, roads and highways. The total cost of paying interest on these bonds—debt service—is in fact one of the biggest single items in B.C.’s provincial budget.

The pro-FPTP argument is that systems that produce single-party majorities should give investors more confidence because the conditions they prefer to see are more likely to remain in place. This is because single-party governments are more secure in their tenure and less subject to political instability.

The only problem with that argument is that it doesn’t seem to hold water. It’s true that Canada, the United Kingdom and the United States have Standard and Poor’s highest rating: AAA. But, so too do almost all the other modern industrialized democracies
that include those in western Europe that mostly have some variant of a proportional representation electoral system. Ireland—dubbed the Celtic tiger because of its vigorous economic growth in recent years—also has the AAA-rating on the latest Standard and Poor’s list.

What about the pro-FPTP argument that single-party majorities, such as those more often produced by FPTP, are better equipped to make the tough decisions sometimes required in the broader public interest. These governments have a higher degree of political security because of their majority. Therefore, they can afford to downplay short-term, tactical political considerations in favour of making policy based on longer-term, strategic, public-interest considerations.

A first response to this is to repeat the arguments made at the outset of this section about the real evidence of relative stability of FPTP and PR governments. A second response is to pose a question regarding the bottom line outcome of government decision-making. Few people would disagree with the proposition that the ultimate objective of, and test for, the effectiveness of government policy-making is the creation of conditions—through the establishment of social, economic, environmental and fiscal policies and programs—that maintain and improve the standard of living and quality of life of citizens.

While it is notoriously difficult to define success of these endeavours in an objective, quantifiable way, in recent years there has been a growing focus on efforts to develop measures for assessing such things. Gross domestic product (GDP) or GDP per person, are perhaps the best-known measures. But many critics argue that these approaches are far too narrow to capture the full meaning of such questions as quality of life.

Other measures have been developed, including an interesting effort by the Pembina Institute in Alberta called genuine progress indicators (GPI). The GPI identifies more than 50 quantifiable indicators of human well being, environmental, social and
economic conditions that can be seen to give a more thorough and complete picture of quality of life. This is an elaborate exercise, still very much under development with its application limited to a single report applying the methodology to Alberta.

Another measure familiar to most Canadians is the United Nations human development index (HDI). The HDI compiles data about adjusted real income and combines it with other data concerning matters such as educational attainment and life expectancy. The result is an annual index that identifies the most livable and least livable countries on earth. The results of the HDI are of interest. Of the top-ten countries in 2004, Canada ranked fourth (it ranked first for several years in a row in the 1990s). Here is the HDI top-ten, set out in a table that also identifies the countries’ electoral system, and, for good measure, the countries’ Standard and Poor’s bond rating:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country by rank</th>
<th>Electoral system</th>
<th>Bond rating</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Norway</td>
<td>PR – party list</td>
<td>AAA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Sweden</td>
<td>PR – party list</td>
<td>AAA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Australia</td>
<td>Alternative vote + STV (Senate)</td>
<td>AAA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Canada</td>
<td>FPTP</td>
<td>AAA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Netherlands</td>
<td>PR – party list</td>
<td>AAA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Belgium</td>
<td>PR – party list</td>
<td>AA+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Iceland</td>
<td>PR – party list</td>
<td>AA+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. United States</td>
<td>FPTP (+ separation of powers)</td>
<td>AAA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Japan</td>
<td>Parallel, FPTP plus partly proportional</td>
<td>AA-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. Ireland</td>
<td>STV</td>
<td>AAA</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Sources for this table are found in Appendix I
To bring this to the provincial level, the 2004 B.C. budget stated that the Standard and Poor’s rating for B.C. is \textit{AA}. This is the second highest of all the provinces, tied with Ontario, and lower only than Alberta’s \textit{AAA}-rating.

The table on page 61 is not designed to make the point that PR systems are inherently better than FPTP systems (although some bolder supporters of PR might be prepared to make such an argument). Instead, it is presented here as rebuttal evidence against the argument that B.C. citizens should be afraid to try any electoral system other than FPTP for fear of putting at risk B.C.’s way of life and economic and social well-being. There just doesn’t seem to be any evidence that the electoral system used in a jurisdiction necessarily has a negative effect on a jurisdiction’s bond rating.

Of the top-ten countries in the world in terms of the UN’s HDI measure for quality of life, seven—including Ireland and Australia, both of which use STV for all or some of their elections—have some form of proportional representation electoral system. This seems to put to rest the argument that STV, along with all other kinds of PR systems, should not be used because they produce the instability and uncertainty that undermines a government’s ability to make the decisions that enhance the well-being of citizens.

The table on page 61 also shows that the existence of a proportional electoral system does not produce the kind of political and policy uncertainty that scares off investors. To be sure, economic success and standard of living are strongly correlated with the existence of plentiful natural resources, well-educated and adaptable labour forces, creative innovators, investors willing to take risks and good transportation and communications infrastructure. But standard of living and quality of life also depend on the existence of a good framework of fiscal and socio-economic policies that allows all those factors to be created and exploited. And, at a minimum, it seems clear that the existence of proportional representation system does not pose a barrier to economic well-being and progress.
THE ISSUE OF GOVERNMENT EFFECTIVENESS

Part of the theme in the preceding section relates to the more general argument by defenders of B.C.’s current FPTP system that it takes stable single-party majority governments to get effective governments. And that in minority or coalition governments, too much time is spent on political maneuvering and too little time is spent on governing.

In B.C. there has been very little experience with minority or coalition governments—the last coalition was during and following the Second World War. But in Ottawa we now have a minority government—admittedly, for the first time in 25 years. Before that era minorities were not that uncommon. Joe Clark’s 1979 minority Progressive Conservative government didn’t last too long, having its first budget defeated because the government whip ‘couldn’t count’, or, more likely, because the Conservatives took a gamble that the electorate would behave as it did in 1958, when it returned a smashing Tory majority after having thrown out the Liberals (but only with a Tory minority) the year before. Pierre Trudeau ran a minority government in 1972-74 and in the spring of 1974 went on to reestablish a majority government.

The poster child for consecutive minority governments in Canada was the Lester B. Pearson era from 1963-68. Pearson never did enjoy a majority in the Commons, but his minority governments succeeded in devising and legislating the Medicare system, the Canada Pension Plan and the Canadian flag—all three of which are quite significant accomplishments for a so-called unstable minority government.

The main feature of proportional representation systems like STV isn’t so much that they will result in minority governments of the form we are familiar with in Canada, but rather that the political culture will likely evolve to produce more formal coalition government arrangements. Such coalitions are more soundly based
on formal agreements among parties in the Legislature, and are more stable than minority governments in the FPTP system. This is because the FPTP system generates minority governments as the exception rather than the rule, and the politicians and parties are not accustomed to dealing with exceptions. A STV system may well produce more minority legislatures—although the experiences of Ireland and Malta indicate that this is not necessarily the case—but the point is that, when this happens, minority governments are seen not so much as exceptions, but as more normal and expected outcomes. As such, the political rules of the game change to adapt to minority government—and this does not have to be a bad thing.

In fact, many STV-supporters would argue that getting the political bargaining out in the open, where more people can see it, produces better public debate and understanding of the issues and the politics involved. It also allows for productive coalitions to form around important public policy issues: coalitions formed from among the various perspectives that are represented in the community. The solutions that are eventually found are more firmly rooted in a broader consensus within the community and the society. The process through which those solutions are arrived at enjoys more legitimacy because of this broader involvement of disparate viewpoints. Such solutions may be substantively better than they otherwise would be because they are shaped by a broader array of political interests represented in a more proportional legislature and government.

**STV: Too Complicated for People To Understand?**

Another criticism of the Citizens Assembly’s recommendation for BC-STV is that the system is too complex and that people will be frustrated by its complexities. The ensuing confusion will serve to further undermine confidence in politics and government in British Columbia. People are accustomed to, and comfortable with, the tradition of walking into the polling station, marking their ‘x’, and finding out who their MLA will be later that evening. Critics of STV argue that
few citizens will understand the concepts of voting for candidates in order of preference and having more than one MLA in a larger riding. Further to their argument, they say that voters will not understand how the vote counting takes place.

The argument that British Columbians won’t understand the STV voting system strikes me as insulting and condescending. People all over the world use electoral systems that are different and more complicated than B.C.’s. It’s ridiculous to imply that the people who use STV in Ireland, Australia, Malta, and in other contexts (such as civic elections in parts of the United States, New Zealand and Scotland) are inherently more intelligent or capable than British Columbians.

From the voter’s perspective, the STV system is not more complex than any of the other activities that confront citizens daily with the need to rank-order their preferences. The complexity of the counting process is introduced for very sound reasons of principle, and, with only a little effort, is quite comprehensible. To argue that such an alternative should be rejected because of these complexities is akin to arguing that any change that employs more sophisticated concepts should be rejected because it is unfamiliar and too hard.

British Columbians have experienced multi-member constituencies and preference voting before. The concepts are not that novel, although they are unfamiliar in our recent political history. However, the way the concepts are combined in the BC-STV electoral system is new to British Columbia. Alberta used STV in Edmonton and Calgary ridings for more than 30 years before the Alberta Government switched to FPTP in 1959.

**Why Isn’t STV Used More Widely?**

Quite bluntly put, the STV model is not in wider use because it is not designed to work in the interests of political parties—it tilts more power to voters than political parties are comfortable
with. And as it happens, political parties generally have a central role in determining the nature of the electoral system.

The rules of the electoral system are the rules that determine how political parties play the game, and those rules have historically been designed with a keen eye on how they will affect the interests of political parties. In most systems, it is the political class that makes the decisions on what electoral rules will be in place. It makes sense, then, that the electoral rules will be designed in such a way that focuses on the needs and interests of political parties, rather than the needs and interests of voters.

In Ireland, which has STV, the political class tried to change the country’s electoral rules by getting rid of STV. The Irish constitution required that such a political decision be decided by a referendum. The question of changing from STV to another system was twice put to the citizens of Ireland. And on both occasions the Irish voted to keep STV.

Why did the Irish vote in favour of STV? I don’t pretend to understand the ins and outs of Irish political history, but I hope I can be forgiven for speculating that the enhanced power given to voters, rather than parties, under STV may have played a role in convincing people to say no to abandoning STV.

It’s interesting to note, as well, that New Zealand has recently adopted STV for local elections and Scotland will soon follow suit. In Wales, as mentioned earlier, a commission reporting in the summer of 2004 recommended that the system for electing the Welsh Assembly be switched from MMP to STV.

On May 17, 2005, British Columbians will be given an unprecedented opportunity to determine the nature of their own electoral system. Other provinces are also considering changes, but none have turned the task of designing the decision over to the people. In other provinces it’s experts, academics, judges and the
political class who are making the decisions. In British Columbia, the citizens will decide.
As was explained briefly in chapter four, the STV policy principle underlying the Droop quota is that it allows for the election of the candidates whose support in the riding is the widest and deepest. Stated another way, the quota is the mathematical minimum number of votes that can be won only by the number of candidates to be elected in that riding. If there is a five-member riding, for example, five and only five candidates can mathematically achieve the quota. It’s impossible for a sixth candidate to get that number of votes. The formula is described as follows:

\[
\text{Number of valid votes} \div (\text{Number of seats} + 1) + 1
\]

Here is an example from the Wikipedia website (an on-line, open-source encyclopedia) of how the Droop quota works:

If there are 100,000 votes cast in a constituency that has five seats, that produces \((100,000/6) + 1 = 16,667\). So the quota each candidate needs to reach is 16,667. Using PR.STV, each voter on a ballot paper receives a list of candidates, with the option of listing their preferences (i.e., how high they rate in the choice of the voter to win a seat). So the favourite candidate receives a number 1, the second favourite
number 2, third favourite number 3, etc. Each voter has absolute freedom to vote for as many or as few candidates they wish. In the first count, all the number 1s are calculated. Where someone exceeds the quota, his or her surplus (total vote minus quota) is calculated. That surplus is analyzed to see which candidates were the number 2 choice of those votes the candidate had over and above the quota, which was the minimum number of votes needed for election. If no candidate reached the quota, the candidate with the lowest vote total would be eliminated, and his or her votes distributed. A series of counts would take place, in which either a surplus or elimination total would be distributed. In theory, enough candidates should reach the quota, leaving not enough votes left distributed among the remaining candidates for a remaining sixth quota. Once the last candidate is at an end, the election count is declared over.

While in theory every election should see the right number of candidates elected through reaching the quota, in practice a minority of voters may only vote for a small proportion of the candidates on a ballot paper, for example only those candidates from one party, candidates of one gender, or even simply one candidate. Those votes are known as NTSC or non-transferable votes and the effect of their removal from the total valid poll may be to reduce the total number of votes available to such an extent that the last candidate may not actually reach the quota. Nevertheless, in reality, as no other candidate may mathematically be able to overtake them as the candidate nearest to the quota, they may in such circumstances be deemed elected ‘without reaching the quota’.

In summary the quota is constructed to ensure that it is mathematically impossible for anyone other than the five candidates elected to reach the quota.

The Wikipedia example talks only very briefly about the redistribution of surplus votes and votes from the least popular, and therefore eliminated candidates. There are various ways to deal
with situations where a candidate receives more than the quota of votes required.

One way to deal with surplus votes would be to ignore them. However, ignoring the surplus votes could be seen to be a waste of those votes that are in excess of the quota—and one of the goals of electoral reform is to waste as few votes as possible.

Another way to deal with surplus votes is to stop counting first preference votes for a candidate as soon as the quota is achieved, and instead look at the second preferences of any subsequent votes cast for that candidate and redirect those votes to the second preference candidates. But that runs the risk that the second preferences identified in this way may not accurately reflect the real distribution of second preferences for that candidate. In other words, the way in which the second preferences are distributed might depend on the order of counting of ballots, rather than fairly representing those second preferences if all the ballots for the super-popular candidate were taken into account. The same problem arises with choosing the surplus votes to be redistributed at random from among the pile of first preference votes for a candidate. The random sample may not reflect accurately the distribution of preferences—which would be both unfair to second preference candidates, and problematic if a recount were required.

**How B.C. Will Count Surplus Votes**

The Citizens Assembly chose another way of determining how surplus votes should be dealt with. It’s more complicated to describe, but it’s much fairer than the counting methods described above. The Assembly’s choice—called the weighted inclusive Gregory method—allows for any election recount to be replicated with accurate results.

The vote-counting system will consider all the votes cast for the candidate receiving the surplus and determine how many
second-preference votes would have gone to each of the other candidates. This takes care of the transfer of votes.

But, what about divisibility? It wouldn’t be fair to allow those second preferences to be passed on to a second candidate at full value. That would violate the principle of ‘one person, one vote’, and in effect give a second full vote to voters who voted for a very popular candidate. To remedy this situation the value of the vote must be divided. If a candidate receives twice the number of votes required by the quota, this is just another way of saying that, in effect, only half of each vote cast for that candidate is needed to achieve the quota. So each vote is divided in half and one half is given to the preferred candidate, while the other half is given to the second preferred candidate.

Put more conceptually, all that is needed is to take the number of surplus votes and divide it by the number of total votes received by that candidate. That gives the transfer value of the surplus vote. Then multiply the number of votes for each of the second preferences by the transfer value, and that determines how the surplus votes are distributed—in a way that is fair, understandable and replicable if there is a need for a recount.

\[
\frac{\text{Number of valid votes}}{\text{Number of total votes received}} = \frac{\text{Transfer of surplus votes} \times \text{Number of votes for each second preference}}{\text{How surplus votes are distributed}}
\]

This may seem complicated, although working through some examples, or conducting a mock election using the system makes it look a lot less complex. Appendix I contains an URL to link to a fact sheet developed by the Citizens Assembly staff describing the vote-counting system, along with an example of how the weighted
inclusive Gregory method of counting chosen by the Assembly would work in practice.

**WHAT WILL THE CONSTITUENCIES LOOK LIKE UNDER STV?**

The Assembly did not draw riding boundaries because it was not within its mandate to do so. The process of drawing such electoral boundaries is already dealt with by the Electoral Boundaries Commission, which is governed by a separate piece of legislation.

Right now, the Electoral Boundaries Commission must be established after every second election to redistribute or redraw the electoral map. This is to take into account shifts in population in the province. The Commission will get to work following the 2005 election, no matter what the outcome of the referendum. If the current system is retained, the boundaries of the single-member constituencies will be readjusted to take into account the changes in population patterns in the province since the last redistribution. If the referendum passes, the Commission will determine how many ridings there will be, how many members each riding will have and establish the boundaries of the ridings. These changes will come into effect along with the other changes—if required—in time for the provincial election in 2009.

If the referendum passes, the Assembly’s recommendation to the Electoral Boundaries Commission is that constituencies have between two and seven members. The higher the number of members, the more proportional the results will be. This is why the Assembly recommended that preference be given to the highest number reasonable in light of all the circumstances.

What circumstances are relevant? There can be a number of factors, including geography, distribution of population, population size, natural communications and transportation links, etc. The Electoral Boundaries Commission is bound to consider these factors in making its recommendation for redistribution.
It’s likely that the STV boundaries will simply reflect a combining of two or more existing constituencies. If the referendum is approved and BC-STV is implemented, the Boundaries Commission is likely to determine that constituencies with larger numbers of MLAs will be in the more concentrated population centres, mostly in the Lower Mainland and Southern Vancouver Island. Constituencies with smaller numbers of MLAs will be in the more rural, sparsely populated parts of the province.

Who Will Be My MLA in a Multi-Member Riding?

Some people seem puzzled by the prospect of having two or more MLAs representing them in their district under a STV system. Who will people call if they have a problem or a concern? What if an MLA says, “It’s not my problem, try one of the other MLAs.” Those citizens who are concerned about such things point to the current single-member constituencies as providing the likelihood of more effective representation, because constituents know who their one MLA is, and therefore know who to go to, and who to hold accountable on election day if that MLA doesn’t respond to voters’ needs.

But when you think about it a bit more, multi-member ridings can offer more of an opportunity than a problem. Having more MLAs gives an individual a greater choice of people to go to with a problem. If a person lives closer to one of the MLAs in their riding, that person might want to approach him or her. Or, a person might approach a particular MLA who has developed an interest or expertise in the issue or program the person has a problem with. If one of the MLAs is a member of the party a person prefers, that person might naturally approach that MLA rather than a MLA representing one of the other parties. In a STV system, the increased proportionality accompanying larger multi-member ridings increases the chances that there will be at least one MLA who represents a person’s political perspective.
The prospects of a voter getting ignored or shunted along also seems less likely, because MLAs in a multi-member constituency have to be concerned about maintaining their quota of vote support. This means, of course, being the first preference of as many voters as possible—ideally the full quota on the first count—but it also means that if the candidate can’t be the voter’s first choice, then the candidate wants to be a voter’s second preference.

Widening the circle of a MLA’s voter support increases the prospects of a MLA’s reelection. The internal competition—even within a single party—for the allegiance of voters in a multi-member STV riding can be intense. This is a benefit, and not a hindrance, for voters needing help from their MLA. In order to raise their profile in the riding, MLAs will be eager to assist as many constituents as possible in order to garner the reputation in the community of being a good constituency MLA. Such a reputation will naturally enhance the MLA’s political standing in the community.

Right now with the FPTP system, a voter can only ask for help from the riding’s one MLA. If that MLA is one of the many who puts a lot of effort into serving the constituency, that’s great. However, some MLAs do not put high priority on constituency work, or might be too busy with cabinet or committee assignments, or might not be planning to run again and are therefore less interested in constituency work. All of these factors can pose a problem for a person who needs help. Some MLAs may not be, or may be perceived as not being as attentive to the problems of constituents who are not their political supporters. Some constituents may be reluctant or unwilling to seek help from a MLA from a party the constituent opposes. All these factors are associated with the current single-member ridings in existence in B.C. The existence of multiple MLAs in a riding helps to mitigate such problems and not to exacerbate them.

It is also worth remembering that the 1991 election was the first time in B.C.’s history when there were no multi-member districts.
Up until that election, at least some ridings were represented by two MLAs, and throughout much of the earlier part of the twentieth century, by as many as six MLAs. The problem of ‘who is my MLA’ has been dealt with for the great majority of B.C.’s political history, and it seems condescending to suggest that people cannot learn how to deal with it again.

**How Will a Premier and Government Be Chosen?**

The process of premier and government selection will not change under a **STV** system. The same approach that is now used, as part of the Westminster parliamentary system, will apply: the leader of the party with the most seats in the Legislature will be asked by the lieutenant governor to form a government and to name a cabinet. The true test for the governing party will be—as it is now—whether the government has the confidence of the Legislative Assembly and will it be able to gather a majority of votes on such key questions of confidence as the Throne Speech and the budget.

To ensure that such a level of confidence exists, a party leader will have either a majority of seats in his or her party caucus, or the support of other caucuses or members sufficient to create such a majority. This can be done by informal or formal arrangements. In a minority government, the arrangements tend to be more informal and less structured than in the case of a coalition government. In coalitions, two or more parties will come together more formally, and it is normally the case that the smaller coalition partners may have membership in the cabinet as well.

**What if a By-Election Is Needed?**

Sometimes a seat becomes vacant between elections. Under the current system, a by-election is held to fill that vacancy. The Citizens Assembly recommended that under the proposed **STV** system any by-election that is required also use preferential voting.
This would mean that voters in the riding would vote their preferences, as in a general election under STV. Because only one person is to be elected, 50%+1 of the votes would be required to meet the quota for a candidate to win the by-election.

If more than one vacancy occurs in that riding, the normal STV preferential voting process would occur and the counting would take place as it would in a general election: the quota would be established and the preferences of voters counted until the vacancies are filled.
Once Assembly members started discussing issues with each other and listening to the views of other British Columbians, it was quickly confirmed that among voters there is a feeling of disconnection from, disinterest in and disillusionment with, politics and government in B.C. Young voters seemed especially turned off by politics, and their voter registration and participation rates are alarmingly low and dropping. Given the reduced voter turnout in federal and provincial elections across Canada and around the world, and given the heightened expressions of apathy or outright alienation on the part of the public vis-à-vis politics, government and politicians, the voter dissatisfaction is by no means limited to B.C. But the fact is that there is a real problem in B.C.—a problem that threatens to erode the foundations of B.C.’s political institutions.

People from all around British Columbia told the Citizens Assembly that:

- They don’t like the way political parties and politicians conduct themselves and are turned off by the political debate that they see on television or read in other media.

- Many voters think the politicians they send to Victoria or Ottawa are quickly transformed into automatons programmed solely to carry political messages from their parties back to the riding, rather than forcefully fighting in the capitals for the interests of their constituents.

A Summary of the Citizens Assembly’s Concerns
• The general nature of partisan political discourse is seen by many voters as trivializing important and complex issues, and as defining issues in a way that condescends to the intelligence, rationality and fair-mindedness of most voters. Voters would like to see their political leaders address real problems in a constructive, thoughtful, strategic and principled way, rather than shouting and pointing fingers at each other in an effort to gain tactical political advantage.

• The underrepresentation of women and minority groups in politics and government strikes many voters as eloquent testimony to the unresponsiveness of B.C.’s political culture to the changes in B.C.’s society. This phenomenon is, in part, caused by the toxic combativeness of that political culture, which has deterred many of those underrepresented British Columbians from trying to participate more actively in public life.

• Many voters don’t think they have any real choice when it comes to elections. They may like a particular party, but don’t like the local candidate. Or, voters may respect a particular candidate, but feel boxed into voting strategically because they fear that voting for that candidate will help elect a candidate, or a party, they can’t stand.

• For many voters the dilemma of choice renders the concept of accountability nearly meaningless at the local level. Voters may want to punish a local candidate who they think is doing a terrible job, but feel their votes must also be cast with an eye on the larger political context. In any event, their vote may well be overwhelmed by people voting for the party or the leader, rather than the local candidate.

• The traditional model of confrontational, winner-take-all, two-party, elected dictatorship politics and government, that is seen as the hallmark of B.C.’s current electoral and political system, may have been appropriate a century ago in a smaller and less diverse society. But, it is viewed as much less suited to building the kinds of mutual understanding and consensus needed to solve problems and decide on
appropriate courses of action in the diverse, pluralistic society now in B.C. The public issues British Columbians face are not as amenable to ‘either/or’, ‘in or out’, ‘yes or no’ binary choices. The issues are complex and mutually interacting and their solutions require and benefit from the involvement of a fuller range of society’s viewpoints and perspectives. This comment applies both to the solutions to problems and to the process through which those solutions are identified and determined.

Some of the issues raised by British Columbians are related to the particular features of the first-past-the-post electoral system. Other issues can be seen to be a function of party and caucus discipline in the Legislature (and therefore more a question of addressing the democratic deficit through parliamentary reform, or the nomination process of parties, or the method through which parties and candidates are funded). Still other issues that were seen as very important and discussed at some considerable length by the Citizens Assembly—such as the role of women and minorities in politics—were not resolvable through changes to the electoral system, but rather were seen to be rooted more deeply in issues of political culture and the policies of political parties.

It’s for reasons mentioned above that many other provinces are looking at changing electoral systems, and many jurisdictions around the world have recently either changed electoral systems or become democracies for the first time. Of the countries that have adopted change in the method of choosing legislators, almost all of them have opted for some form of proportional representation—rather than adopting the first-past-the-post or the single-member plurality system now used in B.C.

Alternative electoral systems, other than FPTP, are also imperfect, but it seems that some of them have the potential to directly address at least some of the concerns the Citizens Assembly identified. And an alternative system may also indirectly help to effect a change in the more general political climate that citizens find so discouraging and disturbing.
When I attended my first meeting of the Citizens Assembly in January 2004, I had no clear idea of what to expect. What I found was a group of 161 British Columbians—from all parts of the province, from all walks of life, with all kinds of backgrounds, experiences and skills—with one thing in common: a real commitment to see if they, as a group, could come up with a solution that would address at least some of the problems that had caused politicians to set up the Assembly in the first place.

After nearly a year, I got to know many of my fellow Assembly members a lot better. I have to say—at the risk of sounding really soppy—that they taught me a lot about the issues, the province, and themselves, and in so doing, provided me with the most inspirational lesson in democracy I have ever experienced.

The members of the Citizens Assembly may have come to the conclusion about changing B.C.’s electoral system by different routes, but the Assembly’s members found an astonishing degree of consensus over the kinds of problems British Columbians face, the kinds of principles and values that guided the Assembly in seeking solutions, and, finally, over what specific solution would improve the voting system and the political climate for British Columbians.

This odd-sounding BC-STV system may have been familiar to some of my fellow Assembly members, but I’m guessing it was not

8

Conclusion
familiar to many of them. It certainly wasn’t familiar to me. But after a lot of thought, discussion and debate, we as an Assembly concluded that this is the alternative we would recommend to British Columbians in the referendum to be held on May 17, 2005, and we made that decision by an overwhelming majority.

The Assembly’s final conclusion was that the BC-STV approach would offer: fair, more proportional results, much better choice to voters, and local representation that held the potential to be more, and not less effective, than the current system. The Assembly saw all these factors as holding the potential to significantly improve the state of democracy in British Columbia. And the Assembly concluded that what risks there might be as a result of adopting a new and unfamiliar system, were both unlikely to materialize in practice and, in any event were far outweighed by the advantages BC-STV provides in improving the state of real democracy in the province.

I very much doubt that any of the Assembly members labours under the impression that adoption of this new electoral system will be a magic solution for all the problems the province faces. No electoral system is perfect, and neither is this one. Nor do Assembly members think that improving the electoral system will fix all the other problems people see with politics and governance in the province, or the country. However, the Assembly members do hope and believe that a change in the electoral system will improve things. These changes, many of the Assembly members believe, will be a necessary, if by no means a sufficient condition for other changes that will engage British Columbians more in their public and political life, and give citizens the feeling that their views count.

Sadly, the public discussion over the Assembly’s recommendation for BC-STV has commenced somewhat haltingly—at this writing in late February 2005—and has been rather desultory, disjointed and, dare I say it, not very helpful.
The issues involved are important. The opportunity that has been presented to voters is utterly unprecedented. I doubt very much that another opportunity like it will come along soon, if ever, especially if the referendum fails. My greatest fear is not that the referendum will be defeated. Instead, my fear is that the STV referendum choice might just die a slow death from voter apathy, lack of engagement and the unavailability of information that fair-minded British Columbians need in order to make an informed decision. This would be a terrible shame.

My aim in describing the thinking process I went through in voting for the BC-STV is to offer my fellow British Columbians a more detailed account of the issues I thought were important, and how they related to one another and to the potential solutions the Assembly considered. This account does not claim to have any academic expertise or to have special knowledge about the questions the Assembly considered. There are a great many sources to go to for more in-depth and authoritative studies of the questions considered here, and I’ve tried to mention a couple of them in this account (see Appendix I). Instead, this book is my own personal account of the kinds of issues that were considered during the Assembly’s process and the principles that guided the decision the Assembly came to in October 2004.

If you have gone to the trouble of reading all of this, you are clearly one of those British Colubians I was aiming to reach. I hope you have found this account to be of assistance.
APPENDIX I

Sources

Other good sources for seeing how the STV system works can be found on the various websites that have been developed on the referendum:
http://www.gov.bc.referendum_info
http://www.citizensassembly.bc.ca
http://www.bc-stv.ca
http://www.citizensassembly.bc.ca/public
http://www.bcestv.ca/
http://www.stvforbc.com/
http://knowstv.ca/
http://www.idea.int/esd/
http://www.fairvotingbc.com/

Another website that I found particularly helpful in understanding how this actually works in real elections in Ireland:
http://www.aceproject.org/main/english/es/esy)

The Irish election results:

Sources for the table on page 61
Human Development Report, 2004, UN:
http://www.hdr.undp.org
Various websites, including:
http://www.idea.int/esd/data/world.cfm
http://www.standardandpoors.com

Wikipedia Website—Droop Quote
http://www.answers.com/topic/droop-quota
APPENDIX II

GLOSSARY

This is an abridged version of the Glossary of Terms Relating to Elections, Representation and Government in British Columbia that was used by British Columbia, Citizens Assembly on Electoral Reform.

Assembly This term is sometimes used as an abbreviation for legislative assembly, the representative body which British Columbians elect as their parliament. More generally, it can refer to an elected body which forms part of the Legislature, or to any group which claims to represent a political community; the Citizens Assembly uses the term in this latter sense.

Alternative vote (AV) The alternative vote is a preferential electoral system (see preferential voting) which requires a voter to number the names of the candidates on the ballot paper in the order of the voter’s preference (that is, to rank the candidates by putting 1, 2, 3, etc. next to their names). If no candidate gains a majority of votes on the first count, the second preference listed on the ballots of the least successful candidate are distributed among the remaining candidates. This process continues until one candidate has a majority of votes. The alternative vote system can be supplemented by electing additional members to provide an opportunity for the representation of small parties; see mixed systems.

British Columbia used the alternative vote to elect members to the legislative assembly at the 1952 and 1953 general elections.

AV See alternative vote
**BC-STV** This is the single transferable-vote electoral system recommended for British Columbia by the Citizens Assembly on Electoral Reform in its final report *Making Every Vote Count: The Case for Electoral Reform in British Columbia*

**Cabinet** The cabinet is a meeting of the premier and the ministers who together make key decisions about government administration and policy. Even though the cabinet plays a central role in the operation of parliamentary government in British Columbia, the responsibilities and operation of the cabinet are not written down in any formal constitutional document.

**Candidate** A candidate is someone who runs for office at an election. In British Columbia, a candidate is a person who is eligible to stand for election to the Legislative Assembly and who has fulfilled the requirements for nomination set out in the Election Act (British Columbia) (part 5, division 1). These include being supported by 25 voters in the electoral district in which the candidate intends to run, and making a deposit of $100.

Almost all successful candidates are members of political parties and parties themselves have procedures for choosing candidates. The process of nominating candidates is a vital one for a political party; by choosing a candidate, it permits that candidate to use the party label and to contest the election in the name of the party. See party discipline.

**Caucus** Caucus is a meeting of the members of parliament who belong to a particular party (as in, the Liberal caucus, the NDP caucus). Meetings of caucus—which are usually held in private—may discuss a wide range of topics of concern to party members, including the policies to be followed by the party and parliamentary tactics. Caucus meetings are an important forum for the exchange of information between the party leaders, ministers (if the party is in government), and the back bench. In the past,
voting at a meeting of the party caucus was used in Canada as a common way of choosing the party leader. Today, leaders are usually chosen at a party convention, or by direct ballot of all the party members.

**Coalition** A coalition is a grouping of two (and occasionally more than two) political parties which work together to win government or to increase their influence in a representative assembly. The coalition parties may indicate before an election that they intend to work together if they win office, or coalition agreements may be formed after the election when it is clear that no single party has a majority of seats. See also majority government.

**Consensus (system)** In contrast to a majoritarian or adversarial system, a consensus system aims to disperse power among a number of political institutions, actors and parties so that government policy requires compromise and the accommodation of a range of views before action can be taken. Consensus systems do not regard bare majority support as sufficient to legitimize government action—broader support is required so that as many groups as possible can be persuaded of the merits of the action. Electoral systems with proportional representation are seen as consensus systems because they are more likely to produce coalition governments and the need for parties to compromise over their policies.

**Constituency** This term is often used interchangeably with riding to refer to an electoral district of the legislative assembly. It can also refer to the audience, interested public, or interest group which is the concern of a particular member of parliament.

**Democracy** Democracy has become an imprecise term but, at its core, it refers to the belief that governments should be responsive to the wishes of the majority of citizens. This explains why elections and democracy are often thought of as being closely related; elections provide a means of choosing a government.
acceptable to the majority of voters and, by electing a representative assembly, creating a body which can make governments accountable. But what we think of as democratic government needs more than just elections; it requires a constitutional structure (see constitution) and a set of rules which protect minorities and individuals as well as majorities.

**Droop quota (formula)** In counting votes for electing candidates under a single transferable vote electoral system, the minimum number of votes needed for a candidate to be elected (the quota) can be calculated by using the Droop quota formula. The quota is calculated as follows: first, the total valid vote in the electoral district is divided by one plus the number of members to be elected; then, one is added to the total (fractions are ignored).

The Droop quota is the smallest number of votes to elect enough candidates to fill all the seats being contested in an electoral district, while being just big enough to prevent any more being elected. If the Droop formula is applied to a single member district, the quota is the total votes (100 percent) divided by 1 plus the number of members to be elected (1); the result is 100 divided by 2 which gives 50 percent plus one vote—a share of the vote that only one candidate can get.

H. R. Droop was an English lawyer who suggested this formula in 1868 as a component of an electoral system.

**Election Act (British Columbia)** The Election Act sets out the administrative machinery for running elections in the Province. In 2004, it has 283 sections dealing with the many aspects of organizing an election including the appointment and duties of electoral officials, the qualifications and registration of voters, the procedures for calling an election, the procedures for the nomination of candidates, the arrangements for voting, the scrutiny and counting of votes, the registration of parties, the monitoring of election expenditure and political advertising, and
the penalties for breaching the rules laid out in the Act. (A copy of the Act can be found on the Queen’s Printer website: http://www.qp.gov.bc.ca/statreg/default.htm. Note that the text may not include the most recent amendments.)

**Electoral district** The geographical area from which one or more representatives is chosen at an election is called an electoral district. Electoral districts are also called ridings or constituencies. The number of members to be chosen from an electoral district is often called its district magnitude. At present the Legislative Assembly of British Columbia is composed of 79 members each elected from one of 79 single-member electoral districts (district magnitude of 1); see also at large election; district magnitude; multimember district; single member district; SMP.

**Electoral formula** The electoral formula is the rule which governs the translation of votes into seats. The electoral formula for the current electoral system in British Columbia is a simple one: the candidate who wins more votes than any other in each electoral district is elected.

There are many different kinds of electoral formulas, but they can be grouped into a number of families: plurality systems where seats are won by the candidate with the most votes even if the candidate does not get a majority of votes; majority systems where candidates must get a majority of votes to be elected (see alternative vote; and second ballot); proportional systems (see proportional representation) where the parties fielding candidates are represented in proportion to the votes won by each party or candidate; and mixed systems which combine two of these systems.

**Electoral rules** The whole body of rules regulating all aspects of an election; see Election Act (British Columbia); electoral system.

**Electoral system** The simplest definition of an electoral system is that it is the set of rules for translating votes cast at an
election into seats for a representative assembly according to a specified electoral formula. Another way of defining an electoral system is to say that it comprises the electoral formula, the ballot structure, and the number of members in each electoral district (the district magnitude).

**Electorate** The electorate is the whole body of electors. The term is also used occasionally to mean a single electoral district.

**First-past-the-post (FPTP)** A first-past-the-post electoral system is one in which the candidate with a plurality of votes wins the seat in a single member district. British Columbia currently uses a FPTP electoral system for electing members to the legislative assembly. See majority.

**FPTP** See first-past-the-post

**Government** In everyday language, the government is the label given to the whole structure of public sector activities but the term also has narrower meanings. Where there is a distinction made between the government and the parliament, government refers to the ministers and public officials who steer the day-to-day operation of departments and agencies, as opposed to the debating, scrutinizing and law making activities which occur in parliament. The premier and other ministers, as members of parliament, are politically responsible for government policy and collectively form what is sometimes called the government of the day (see also cabinet). In this narrow sense, the government is the premier and the body of ministers commissioned to implement the policies of the party or coalition which has the support of a majority of the members of the legislative assembly. See also parliamentary system.

**Gregory (method)** In counting votes under a single transferable-vote system, if a candidate has more than the minimum number of votes needed to be elected (see Droop quota), a procedure is needed to allocate the surplus votes to other candidates. The may
be done by taking a number of ballots equal to the surplus at random from the ballots of the successful candidate and assigning votes to the next available preference shown on the ballot (that is, to candidates who have not already been elected or excluded).

In 1880, J. B. Gregory contended that this process of random selection could produce varying results depending on the choice of the randomly selected ballots used for making the transfers to other candidates. He suggested that all the relevant ballots should be recounted, assigned to other candidates according to the preferences of the voters, but at a reduced value called the transfer value. The transfer value is calculated by dividing the surplus votes by the total number of relevant votes.

There are three variations of the Gregory method which differ as to the definition of ‘relevant votes’ for calculating the transfer value. Gregory’s original suggestion was that only the ballots that last contributed to the creation of the surplus votes should be counted (the Gregory last parcel method). Some Australian elections use a second method, the Inclusive Gregory method, where relevant votes are defined as all the votes that contributed to a candidate’s surplus. The BC-STV system recommended by the Citizen Assembly uses the Weighted Inclusive Gregory method under which all votes are counted and assigned to other candidates still in the count according to the voters’ preferences, but the ballots are given separate transfer values depending on their origin (that is, whether they are first preferences, or transfers from one or more other candidates).

The Citizens Assembly decided that the Weighted Inclusive Gregory method was most in keeping with the goals of proportional representation by the single transferable vote, was fairer to the voters than the other options, and did not add significantly to task of counting (or recounting) ballots.

**Legislation** Laws and government regulations are collectively known as legislation. A bill (a proposal for a law) which has been
passed by the Legislative Assembly of British Columbia and has been assented to by the lieutenant governor, becomes law as an act of parliament. Such an act of parliament can also be referred to as a statute of British Columbia.

**Legislative assembly** The Legislative Assembly of British Columbia has been the elected component of the Province’s parliamentary system of government since the establishment of self-government in the Province in 1871. It is currently a representative body of 79 members elected from single member districts for a term of four years unless dissolved earlier (see fixed term; dissolution). The government must maintain the support of a majority of the members of the Assembly to stay in office. The functions of the legislative assembly include passing legislation, authorizing the raising and expenditure of public money, scrutinizing the activities of government, raising issues of public concern, investigating matters of public interest, and acting as a forum for publicizing the concerns of individuals and groups throughout British Columbia.

All Canadian provinces have a representative assembly which discharges similar functions. All but three provincial assemblies are called the legislative assembly; Nova Scotia and Newfoundland and Labrador each have a house of assembly, and Quebec has a national assembly.

**Legislature** The Legislature is the law making component of government. In the case of British Columbia, the Legislature is the Legislative Assembly, although it should be noted that legislation which has passed though the Legislative Assembly does not become law until it is assented to by the lieutenant governor. To this extent, the Legislature of British Columbia is the Legislative Assembly and the lieutenant governor acting in the name of the Crown.

**List system (of proportional representation)** List systems are one of two families of electoral systems using proportional
representation. Proportional representation by the list system is based on the voter choosing between lists of candidates provided by political parties. While there are many ways of counting votes under a list system, and some versions permit voters to select their preferred candidate from a party list (open-list or flexible-list systems), list systems are based on the representation of parties as organizations rather than individual candidates.

In the simplest list systems, an elector votes for a party list, and the share of votes gained by each party list is matched by a similar proportion of seats in the assembly. If a party wins 30 percent of the votes for an assembly of 100 members, the party is assigned 30 seats, the members being the top-30 of a list of candidates provided by the party before the election.

**Local member** This term usually refers to a member of a representative assembly chosen from a single member electoral district. Each geographically defined district has a single ‘local’ member. Those supporting single-member plurality or majority electoral systems often argue that representation, accountability, and access to government is enhanced by having a single local member to speak for those resident in his or her electoral district.

**Majoritarian** This term is used in a general sense to refer to a system of government where power is concentrated in a single governing party which controls a parliamentary executive having broad constitutional powers to act in the name in the majority.

A majoritarian electoral system is one which privileges parties which win a majority of parliamentary seats even if they do no gain a majority of votes. Single-member plurality systems, and the alternative vote and second ballot systems are all seen a majoritarian electoral systems.

**Majority** A majority of votes or seats is one more than half the total number of votes or seats; fifty percent plus one.
Majority system A majority electoral system is one which requires candidates to gain a majority of votes before they are elected. The two most common majority systems are the alternative vote and the second ballot.

Majority government A majority government is one which is supported by a majority of members of the legislative assembly, all of whom are members of the same political party. This is in contrast with a coalition government where a parliamentary majority is composed of the members of two (and occasionally more than two) political parties, both of whom have ministers in the government. It can also be contrasted with a minority government where the governing party does not hold a majority of seats but is kept in office by the support of one or more parties or independent members who do not contribute ministers in the government.

While British Columbia has experienced only majority governments since 1953, there were coalition governments between 1941 and 1952 (Liberal and Conservative parties), and a minority government (Social Credit) from 1952 to 1953.

Member of the legislative assembly (MLA) This is the title of someone who is elected to the Legislative Assembly of British Columbia. The abbreviation MLA can be used as shorthand for a member of the Legislative Assembly.

Minority government A minority government is one where the governing party does not control a majority of seats in the assembly, and has not formed a coalition agreement with another party in the assembly to establish a parliamentary majority and to share ministerial posts. A minority government is kept in power by an understanding that the government will gain the support of another party (or one or more independent members) who will vote to support the government. This support does not involve
the party becoming part of the government’s ministerial team, and the support may not extend to supporting all of the government’s legislative program.

The essence of a minority government is that the support keeping the government in office can be withdrawn at any time, triggering the loss of the government’s majority in the assembly. Loss of majority support in the assembly gives the premier two choices: the premier can resign in favour of another member of the assembly who can form a government which has the support of a majority of assembly members; or—and this will be the usual outcome—the premier can recommend to the lieutenant-governor that parliament is dissolved and a general election is held.

Minority governments are not necessarily unstable or short lived if they can come to an agreement with another party to support the government—the Liberal minority government in Ontario from 1985 to 1987, for example, entered into a formal accord with the Ontario New Democratic Party. Even with this support, the government must work continually to gain support beyond its own partisan supporters for every piece of legislation. Such a situation makes governments extremely responsive to the views of members of parliament, and open to parliamentary scrutiny in ways which rarely occur under majority governments.

**Mixed member proportional (MMP)** The mixed-member proportional (MMP) system is a mixed system of representation which usually combines a single-member plurality electoral system with a list system of proportional representation to achieve an assembly whose party composition reflects the proportion of votes cast for each party. Voters are required to vote for both a local member and a preferred party (sometimes this is combined into a single choice for a candidate and party), and the assembly is made up of members who are elected from single-member electoral districts and members who are elected from party lists. This system has been adopted for the German lower house (the Bundestag).
and, more recently, by New Zealand’s House of Representatives. This mixed system aims to combine the advantages of geographical representation (the local member) with the proportional representation of parties.

**Mixed systems** It has become common over the last decade for electoral systems to combine two electoral formulas for the choice of candidates for a representative assembly. New Zealand, for example, has adopted a system which combines a single-member plurality system with a list system of proportional representation (see mixed member proportional (MMP)). While most mixed systems aim to achieve proportional outcomes—the vote share of a party is matched by a similar share of seats in the assembly—this is not always the case. Some mixed systems such as that used for the Japanese House of Representatives produce outcomes which favour large parties. These systems are sometimes called mixed-member majority systems (MMM).

**MLA** See member of the legislative assembly

**MMM** See mixed systems

**MMP** See mixed member proportional

**Multimember district** A multimember district is an electoral district which returns more than one member to a representative assembly. The number of members returned from an electoral district is called the district magnitude. Multimember districts have district magnitudes greater than one.

British Columbia has a long history of using multimember districts for the Legislative Assembly. From the first election for the legislative assembly in 1871 until 1986, multimember districts were used to elect a substantial proportion of the members. Two, three, four, five and six member districts have been used, with multimember districts of three or more sometimes being used for the urban areas of Vancouver and Victoria.
The Citizens Assembly has recommended that British Columbia adopt multimember districts as a component of the BC-STV electoral system. Sparsely settled and remote areas of the province may have electoral districts with as few as two members, while densely populated regions may have electoral districts with from five to seven members.

**Official opposition** In a parliamentary system, the members of parliament who do not support the government are known collectively as the opposition. The largest party grouping of these members is often given formal recognition as the official opposition, with its leader known as the leader of the opposition. This recognizes the opposition as a potential alternative government, and the leader of the opposition as the party leader who may become the premier after the next general election. The office of leader of the official opposition is mentioned in the Constitution Act (British Columbia) (section 1), but no role is specified for the office.

**Opposition** See official opposition

**Order in council** This is an official document issued by the lieutenant governor in council under the authority of an act of the legislative assembly appointing someone to an official office or authorizing action by a specified person, office or body. The Citizens Assembly was established by an order in council.

**Parliament** Parliament is the general name given to representative assemblies in Canada. In British Columbia it refers to the legislative assembly. These bodies make the laws which regulate our social and economic life and provide the authority for government action. Note that the Parliament of British Columbia comprises the legislative assembly and the lieutenant governor acting in the name of the Crown; laws cannot be made without the assent of the lieutenant governor. The executive can also delay or defer the date on which legislation comes into force. This arrangement
strengthens the already considerable power of the government of the day to control the process of law making. See parliamentary government; parliamentary system.

**Parliamentary government** Parliamentary government is a system of representative democracy in which the most important executive officials are chosen from among the members of an elected assembly; see parliamentary system.

**Parliamentary system** A parliamentary system of government is one of the two basic forms of representative democracy. The distinguishing characteristic of parliamentary government is that the government of the day is chosen from representatives who have been elected to a parliamentary assembly. That is, the most important elected offices of government—the premier or prime minister and the other ministers who together with the premier form the government—are not elected directly but indirectly through parliamentary elections. Since the emergence of parties with strong party discipline, parliamentary government has meant that governments in Canada usually have control over stable parliamentary majorities (see majority government). This greatly reduces the ability of parliamentary assemblies to challenge the wishes of the government of the day in parliament.

Parliamentary systems make a distinction between the head of government (the premier or prime minister) who is the chief elected official in the government, and the head of state who represents the formal exercise of executive power.

The other system of representative democracy is presidential government. In this system, the president who is both head of government and head of state, is elected separately from a representative assembly. Ministers are not usually permitted to be members of the assembly but are appointed by the president. Presidential systems combine the offices of head of government and head of state in the president, but aim to check the power
of the government of the day by separating power between the president and a powerful legislature.

**Party** The Constitution Act (British Columbia) provides a definition of a party as ‘…an affiliation of electors comprised in a political organization whose prime purpose is the fielding of candidates for election to the legislative assembly…’ (section 1). For a party’s name to appear on the ballot paper at an election for the legislative assembly, and for a party to gain tax and other financial benefits, the party must be registered under the Election Act (Part 9).

Parties as we know them today first contested elections in British Columbia in 1903. Before that date, government majorities were maintained by loose groups of members of the Legislature united by a general stance on public policy, by loyalty to a particular leader, or by the hope of advancement. The label ‘ministerialist’ is often given to governments which operated in such a system.

**Party discipline** Modern parties are disciplined in the sense that, once elected to a representative assembly under the label of a party, it is expected that the member will adhere to the general principles and platform of the party and will vote with his or her colleagues in the assembly. If the member does not conform to the decisions of the party, he or she may be threatened with expulsion from the party caucus and the withdrawal of the party’s endorsement at the next election. This is a powerful inducement for members to conform to the party line. It is the price that members must pay for using the party label to gain election, and to gain the benefits of party membership.

**Party leader** The leader of a political party is a person chosen to speak for the party, to be the focus of election campaigns, and to take responsibility for the party’s performance in parliament. If the party wins enough seats to win government, the party leader becomes premier or prime minister. Party leaders in Canada are
now chosen by leadership conventions organized by the party, or by a ballot of all party members.

In British Columbia, the leader of a political party which has four or more members in the legislative assembly is recognized by the Constitution Act (British Columbia) as being “leader of a recognized political party” (section 1).

**Party list**  See list system of proportional representation

**Plurality**  A party which gains a plurality of votes or seats is one which has more votes than any other party, but does not have a majority of votes or seats.

**Plurality (electoral) system**  A plurality electoral system is one which permits candidates to win seats even though they do not gain a majority of votes; see first-past-the-post; single member plurality system.

**Political party**  See party

**PR**  See proportional representation

**Preferential voting**  Any electoral system which requires voters to rank candidates on a ballot paper by numbering them in the order of the voter’s preference, is a preferential voting system. The alternative vote and proportional representation by the single transferable-vote method require voters to number their ballots under a system of preferential voting.

British Columbia used preferential voting with the alternative vote for the 1952 and 1953 general elections in the Province.

The BC-STV electoral system recommended by the Citizens Assembly uses preferential voting.
**Premier**  The premier is the name given to the head of government of the province of British Columbia and is the province’s chief elected executive official. The premier is commissioned by the lieutenant governor to form a government which has the support of a majority of members of the Legislative Assembly. The premier is usually the leader of the political party which has won a majority of seats in the legislative assembly.

Although the premier is mentioned in the Constitution Act (British Columbia) as president of the Executive Council (section 9(1)), the position and role of the premier in the governmental system is not well specified in provincial constitutional documents. Even though the premier is the most important political office in the province, the functions and responsibilities of the premier as head of government are left to customary practices rather than constitutional law.

**Presidential government**  See parliamentary system

**Proportionality**  The view that a party’s share of votes should be matched by a similar share of seats in the Legislative Assembly rests on an idea of representation which stresses the importance of proportionality. Those who argue that fairness—in the sense of producing proportional outcomes—is the most important component of an electoral system, favour proportional representation.

**Proportional representation (PR)**  Proportional representation refers to a family of electoral systems which stress the importance of ensuring that the proportion of seats won by a party in a representative assembly reflects as closely as possible the proportion of votes won by the party. These systems often use more complicated procedures than other electoral systems for counting votes and allocating seats, but the basic principle on which they are based is straightforward—a representative
assembly should reflect the distribution of opinion in the political community as closely as possible. There are two broad ways
in which proportional representation can be achieved: the list
system and the single transferable vote (STV) system. Proportional
outcomes can also be achieved by mixing proportional
representation with a non-proportional system; see mixed-member
proportional (MMP) systems.

The single transferable-vote system of proportional representation
is sometimes called a quota preferential systems because it uses
quotas for working out which candidates are to be elected.

All systems of proportional representation require multimember
districts or at large elections.

**Quota** Under the single transferable-vote system of proportional
representation, the quota is the minimum number of votes required
for a candidate to be elected. The quota will vary according to
the number of members to be elected from the electoral district
(district magnitude) and the formula used. See Droop quota

**Representative assembly** See assembly

**Representative democracy** A democratic political system is
now assumed to be one in which periodic elections are held to
choose key executive and legislative office holders and to keep the
government responsive and accountable to citizen voters. That
is, popular control of government is achieved indirectly through
the election of representatives to act on behalf of the political
community. It is now usually taken for granted that democracy
means representative democracy rather than direct democracy.

**Responsible government** The term responsible government is
often used to describe the relationship between the government—
the premier and other ministers—and the Legislative Assembly
in British style parliamentary systems. It refers to the fact that the
political executive—the premier and ministers—are chosen from and accountable to an elected parliament. In this respect it is a synonym for parliamentary government.

Responsible government also suggests that ministers are individually and collectively responsible to parliament for the actions of government. This is true in a broad sense—the government will be held accountable for its actions at the next general election—but it is less true if it implies that ministers will be held to account for their actions by parliament. The existence of disciplined political parties has meant that ministers can usually escape punishment for reckless or incompetent actions by themselves or their departments by blaming an advisor or a public servant. Punishment is only meted out to ministers if the premier (or prime minister) assesses that the minister has become a political liability to the government as a whole.

**Riding** See electoral district

**Run off** See second ballot

**Seat** A seat is shorthand for a member of a representative assembly. The Legislative Assembly of British Columbia has 79 seats, that is, it is made up of 79 members.

**Seat share** The seat share of a party is the proportion of seats it has won at a general election for a representative assembly. It can be compared with the party’ vote share to see if the seat share is proportional to the votes cast; see proportional representation.

**Second ballot** The second ballot electoral system is a majority system which requires elections to be run in two stages. At the first stage, electors vote using a first-past-the-post system. Candidates winning a majority of votes are declared elected. In electoral districts where no candidate wins a majority of votes, a second
election is held where the contest is restricted to the two candidates who won the most votes at the first stage, or only those candidates with more than a certain share of the vote. At the second election, the candidate with the most votes wins. The second ballot system is a majority system because it ensures that all or most successful candidates have majority support.

The second ballot is used in France for the election of the president (an election at large across the whole country). If no presidential candidate wins a majority of votes on the first round, only the top two candidates take part in the runoff election held two weeks later. For the election of the 577 members of the French National Assembly (from 577 single-member districts), only those candidates with more than 12.5 percent of the first round vote can participate in the runoff elections held one week later in those electoral districts where no candidate won a majority at the first election. At the 2002 elections for the French National Assembly, only 58 members were elected with majorities on the first round.

**Single-member district** This is an electoral district which is represented by a single member of a representative assembly.

**Single-member plurality system (SMP)** This electoral system is the system currently used in British Columbia for the Legislative Assembly. See first-past-the-post; majority; plurality; single-member district.

**Single non-transferable vote (SNTV)** The non-transferable vote (SNTV) is an electoral system which gives voters a single vote in an electoral district which is represented by two or more members of an assembly (see multimember district). The candidates with the most votes are elected. The implications of this system are that, in order to maximize its representation, a large party must discipline its supporters so that their votes are allocated between the party’s candidates. It also means that candidates of the same party are, to some extent, running against each other as much as opposition
candidates. The electoral system produces semi-proportional results and has been used in Japan, Korea and Taiwan.

**Single transferable vote (STV)** Single transferable vote (STV) systems are one of two families of proportional representation. Proportional representation by the single transferable vote method is based on the idea that the range of opinion in the community should be mirrored in the composition of the representative assembly. While there are many ways in which STV can be modified, it rests on the assumption that voters can choose between candidates rather than parties. Voters are required to rank candidates in the voters’ order of preference by numbering the candidates on the ballot (see preferential voting). The ballots are then counted in a way which ensures that as many ballots as possible contribute to the election of a candidate of the voters’ choice. The procedures for doing this can be complicated, but the principle is straightforward—that a variety of minority as well as majority opinions are represented in the assembly, provided that the minorities have a large enough proportion of votes to cross the threshold for representation. This threshold is set by the quota of votes needed for representation and can vary depending on the details of the STV system to be used; see Droop quota.

The details of the BC-STV electoral system recommended for British Columbia by the Citizens’ Assembly can be found elsewhere in this Report. See also Gregory method.

**SMP** See single-member plurality system

**SNTV** See single non-transferable vote

**Spoiled ballot** A spoiled ballot (or vote) is a ballot paper which cannot be counted towards a candidate’s or party’s total vote because the ballot is incorrectly filled in or has marks or writing on it which break electoral rules for the validity of the ballot. The more complicated the ballot, the higher the likelihood of spoiled ballots.
**STV** See single transferable vote

**Threshold** In its narrow sense, this term refers to the minimum proportion of the vote required to gain representation under any given electoral formula. This is particularly important in proportional systems because the threshold affects the number of small parties which can gain representation (see proportional representation).

It can also be used more broadly to indicate the minimum proportion of votes, or the minimum number of seats, which must be won before a party can gain representation under an electoral system. Under the German MMP system, for example, a party must win five percent of the votes or three electoral districts before its vote share can be matched by the appropriate proportion of seats. These rules are designed to prevent the representation of very small parties.

**Transfer value** See Gregory method

**Turnout** The proportion of voters on the voters list who go to a polling place on election day and cast a vote, is called the turnout. The turnout for the British Columbia provincial general election held in 2001 was 71.0 percent.

**Vote share** The vote share of a party is the proportion (expressed as a percentage) of the total valid votes won by a party at a general election. It can be compared with the party’s seat share to see if the seat share is proportional to the votes cast (see proportional representation).

**Voters list** This is the official list of all persons eligible and registered to vote at an election. See also turnout.

**Weighted Inclusive Gregory (method)** See Gregory method
**Westminster system**  This term is often used to describe the British variant of parliamentary government. While the term and the British parliamentary tradition are frequently applied to describe the Canadian parliamentary system, Canadian parliamentary institutions differ significantly from the British system, most notably in the limitations on parliamentary government imposed by the federal system and the entrenchment of key sections of the Canadian Constitution, judicial review of government action and legislation, and the existence of the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms.

The most important common factor between the British and Canadian parliamentary traditions is a monarchical executive and the failure of constitutional documents to specify the roles, functions and responsibilities of the head of state, head of government and the relationship between the premier, ministers and parliament.
About the Author

Jack MacDonald was one of the 161 members of the B.C. Citizens Assembly on Electoral Reform.

Jack was born and raised in Victoria and has had a life-long interest in government and politics. He studied political science as an undergraduate at the University of Victoria and as a graduate student at Yale University. He worked as an executive assistant to a federal cabinet minister in Ottawa before joining the federal public service.

Jack’s public service career extended over almost 30 years—in the federal government in Ottawa and the British Columbia provincial government in Victoria. He was an assistant deputy minister in Victoria for the final 14 years of his career and retired in 2002.