The British Columbia Citizens’ Assembly on Electoral Reform
A Citizens’ Assembly for B.C.

- A new idea in context of a government’s general reform agenda
- Members participating as *citizens*, not *representatives*
- Clear, specific and limited mandate
The BC Assembly’s Mandate

1. Analyze BC’s Electoral & Parliamentary Politics
2. Consider Alternative Electoral Systems
3. Consult Widely
4. Deliberate
5. Recommend maintenance of status quo or an alternative
6. Submit their recommendation to decision by the public in a referendum
British Columbians Respond

- 160 individuals drawn *at random* from the voters’ list
  (*politicians excluded*)

- Gender and age balanced; representative of the diverse population
  (*occupation, education, origin, ethnicity*)

- Few knew much about the subject of electoral systems
Meeting the Mandate’s Challenge

Learning
Listening
Deliberating
Deciding

a new technical subject
hearing from the public
openness to others’ arguments
accepting the need to make trade-offs

No instructions (no problem to ‘fix’) threw members back on basic values

Assembly members embraced randomness as their continuing and fundamental organizational principle
Thinking about Electoral Systems

✔ What sort of electoral system does BC need?
✔ What kind of politics do British Columbians want?
✔ What kind of British Columbia do its citizens want?
✔ What shared values should define the future?
✔ What values should govern its collective activity?

What electoral system might institutionalize those values?
Values that shape the decision

- Little difference in relative importance of values associated with the working of electoral systems

- Members understood –
  1) Some valued features are: *definable characteristics*, others are *probable consequences* of electoral system operation
  2) Trade-offs would be necessary
Assembly Members’ Values

- Relatively little variation amongst them
- High levels of individual consistency over time
- Congruent with fellow citizens
Intense Discussions

High School Teacher
Community Activist
Fish Camp Operator
Wall Mart Manager

Dentist
Choosing Core Electoral System Values

- Small group discussions produced consensus on centrality of 3 key values to any alternative electoral system:

  voter choice  proportional representation  local representation

- All 3 were definable features of an electoral system

  voter choice  –  ballot structure
  proportional representation  –  electoral formula
  local representation  –  district structure

- Other important values effectively took second place in the members’ minds as they worked to actually design a specific system for British Columbia
Trading off Values in Decision-making

- Voter Choice, Proportional Representation and Local Representation are competing values.

- Members had to decide how to balance them when they individually gave different priorities to each.

- They wanted to find a consensus acceptable to others (and so the province) rather than simply support the particular combination they personally favoured.
3 Values Structuring System Choice

- Voter choice was most valued
  consensus on it meant it was not the subject of much debate

Proportional Representation was critical
between alternatives with similar proportionality it was not decisive

- Local representation
  became critical precisely because there was least agreement on it
The Final Debate

- Debate ultimately revolved around the importance of a value which was most unevenly distributed (i.e. *Local Representation*).

- This took time as members engaged in a long and complex conversation with each other.
**Deliberation ➤ Accommodation ➤**

**Shifting Electoral System Preferences**

- Dramatic changes over time as members learned about systems but then also considered views of others
- Compared 2 specific alternatives
- Final result reflects acceptance of need to accommodate a minority of members’ concerns for local representation
One Member’s Account at:

Randomocracy

A Citizen’s Guide
to Electoral Reform in British Columbia

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

Jack Mac Donald

www.bcelectoralreform.ca
The Burgerforum

- Dutch government constitutes a Citizens’ Assembly on Electoral Reform

- Assembly deciding (Nov 10) and it appears they will opt for maintaining key features of the existing system
  - nationwide PR
  - no local electoral districts

- Members have given much thought to finding ways to constrain coalition-making

  Likely outcome will be a recommendation to not substantially alter the current system.
www.burgerforumkiesstelsel.nl