

# **TURNING VOTERS INTO CITIZENS: THE CITIZENS' ASSEMBLY AND REFORMING DEMOCRATIC POLITICS<sup>1</sup>**

R. Kenneth Carty  
Department of Political Science  
University of British Columbia

The year 2005 may go down in our history as a major milestone in the development of Canadian democracy. We all know others: 1867 saw the British North America Act which created Confederation; 1931 marked the Statute of Westminster which established our sovereign nationhood; 1947 produced the Canadian Citizenship Act which distinguished us as a people; and 1982 repatriated the Constitution whose Charter of Rights and Freedoms made us masters in our own home. These are all dates for schoolchildren to mark, and for citizens to celebrate, as turning points in our evolution as a democratic community. So what is it about 2005 that might put it in the same category? Can we really say that Canadian democracy will be changed this year?

To be honest it is really too early to say, but there is good reason to believe that this may be the year in which Canadians fundamentally

First, the lopsided victories of parties in several provinces – British Columbia, New Brunswick and Prince Edward Island stand out – have eviscerated meaningful parliamentary government in those provinces for years at a time. The parliamentary system depends upon a strong and effective legislative opposition and without it there is no check on the ‘elected dictatorships’ that the system provides. While weak oppositions have too often been the bane of good provincial government in Canada, the recent cases have driven home the lesson that the problem is serious and systemic.

Second, in the late 1990s three provinces – Quebec, Saskatchewan and British Columbia – were governed by parties that had won fewer votes than their opponents in the previous general election. Such so-called ‘wrong winners’ were not unknown in Canada, but the coexistence of three at the same time seemed to signal some more fundamental systemic problem with our governing arrangements.

Third, despite much talk and the declared intention by many political parties to encourage the participation of a more diverse cross section of the population in electoral politics and parliamentary life, the legislative chambers are still dominated by over-educated, middle-aged, white males. The growth in women’s participation has stalled and now appears to compare unfavourably with their place in the professions and other sectors of the society and economy. Further evidence of a systemic problem.

All these aspects of provincial experience speak to the rules of the electoral game. In our First-Past-the-Post (FPTP) electoral system there is no regular or predictable connection between the number of votes received and the number of seats won. Lopsided outcomes, or inversions of vote-seat relationships, are just two of the possible outcomes to be expected. And the winner-take-all character of the system seems bound to make it harder for underrepresented groups or minorities to play a full role in the life of the community’s politics. It is perhaps little surprising then that the electoral system itself is seen at the heart of the problem and that many

now believe any genuine transformation in our democracy has to begin with the electoral system.

Normally we do not expect politicians in power to be avid reformers, especially of the very system that brought them to office. However, in most provinces, the premiers themselves have been key figures in stimulating a reform agenda and this is one of the important features of the current movement which may yet see it through. PEI’s Pat Binns appointed an Electoral Reform Commission and then promised a provincial referendum; Jean Charest’s Quebec government introduced a draft of sweeping changes to the province’s election act into the legislature; New Brunswick’s Bernard Lord set up a Commission on Legislative Democracy and asked for a report within a year; and British Columbia’s Gordon Campbell was responsible for the establishment of a fully independent Citizens’ Assembly on Electoral Reform. The success of the BC process has encouraged Ontario’s premier McGuinty to follow suit and establish a reform secretariat charged with establishing an independent Assembly for his province.

This leads us to an important observation. The electoral reform agenda is now being driven from the grass roots. For years debate about electoral reform focused on Ottawa and the perceived need to remedy the dysfunctional regional imbalances that a Single Member Plurality electoral system creates for our national politics and governance. And so the schemes designed and promoted by electoral reform enthusiasts have directed themselves to curing the ills of regionalism stimulated by the system.

Little of this preoccupation with regional imbalance consumes provincial debates and so the issue is now being cast in different, and varied, terms. Each province’s politics is different, each is structured by a unique party system; their approaches to the problem differ and the solutions they offer vary. Indeed, with questions of electoral reform now being defined by the imperatives of the provinces, it may well be that different parts of the country will devise





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Columbia had the grandest (or vaguely defined) aspiration – it wanted a more democratic political system. These differences spoke directly to the processes, and through them the

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real power to outsiders who surprised by proposing the adoption of a system that could significantly change the way representative democracy is practiced. And New Brunswick,

Membership involved a major commitment of time and energy – members spent a minimum of 30 days during 2004 on Assembly work – and so it is perhaps not surprising that those who agreed to participate were individuals who had already demonstrated high levels of social involvement. Virtually all were regular voters and almost 90% reported that they were active in local voluntary associations, most saying they were active in several different kinds of local groups. They were also generally open and trusting individuals: 78% said they believed most people “would try to be fair” rather than “take advantage of me”, and nearly as many (72%) said “most people can be trusted.” Members began with a good knowledge of some basic Canadian political information but the majority knew relatively little about other electoral systems and most could not identify countries in which different types of systems were used. While the majority admitted they were not particularly satisfied with the way democracy, or the electoral system, works in British Columbia, nor did they think it acceptable that a party could win a majority of seats without a majority of votes, few came to the Assembly championing a particular electoral system. As they started, only 9% indicated they had a system they preferred.

In many citizen engagement exercises individuals come to the table representing some interest, group or position. This was not the case at the Assembly whose members came as individual citizens charged with an important public policy question. Indeed they were all being asked to make a major commitment that would bring no immediate personal benefits. At best their efforts might improve the character of public life in the province over the long term. In effect, these voters were being asked to behave as citizens concerned for the common good.

Assembly members seized this opportunity. They worked extremely hard at a challenging learning process that introduced them to both conceptual and practical issues most had never given much thought to. Their specialized knowledge of the world of electoral systems grew, but so too did a more general interest in, and attention to, the wider issues of politics.

Members became active participants in public debates; they listened to their fellow citizens in 50 public hearings across the province; they consumed the contents of over 1600 submissions filed by the public. And they resolved to work to a recommendation that reflected a set of basic values that they could build a consensus upon. Only one person withdrew from the Assembly and attendance at its meetings was almost perfect with members missing only for major family obligations. At the end of the process they produced a recommendation that, while not unanimous, reflected an overwhelming agreement that there was a better electoral system that they could recommend to their fellow voters.

There were probably good reasons to believe that gathering a group of 160 ordinary voters together and asking them to make detailed recommendations on a complex and quite technical subject would not work. Surely this was a matter for specialists or practitioners, as in New Brunswick, Quebec or almost anywhere else electoral reform has been tried. But the British Columbia Citizens’ Assembly on Electoral Reform was a success. Voters can, and did, become citizens capable of informed and thoughtful reflection and decision on the institutions of their common democratic life.

No doubt some of the credit can go Gordon Gibson’s sound plan with its simple focused mandate, the excellent leadership of Jack Blaney and the work of the Assembly staff, and the superb physical facilities at the Maurice J. Wosk Centre in Vancouver. But there were probably five key factors critical to making the Assembly process successful:

- Random Selection of the Members – Though potential members had to ‘opt-in’ when their names were drawn, the fact of random selection meant that all members came as unencumbered individuals free to use their judgment as to what would be best for the province. Their selection in this way guaranteed they were a representative group of British Columbians and legitimated their claims to speak to the values and concerns of the population as a whole.







their seats. This marks the end of easy safe seats for individual politicians.

- Transformed party discipline. Parties have to balance their interest in unified action with the electoral interests of their Members. This undermines an authoritarian style of leader-centred discipline.
- Proportional Representation. This will produce legislatures in which a party's seat shares reflect the electoral support they have among the public.
- Coalitional as opposed to adversarial style politics. With no expectation of forming a single-party government, parties have an incentive to practice a more accommodative style of politics.
- Independents. This is probably the only electoral system that really gives independent candidates a respectable chance of getting elected.

All of these features of STV spoke to the particular balance among local representation, proportionality and voter choice that Assembly members believed that ordinary voters wanted in an electoral system. In the end this is why their decision for STV proved to be a comparatively easy one. So in retrospect it does not look so surprising. The real surprise is that the government and politicians gave these voters the opportunity to determine what they wanted in a democratic electoral system. In Ireland, when politicians asked the electorate in referendums whether they wanted to keep their STV system, voters twice replied with a resounding YES. We shall soon see whether BC voters do the same.

### **BRITISH COLUMBIAN VOTERS AS CITIZENS**

The Citizens' Assembly was an important initiative and may change the way we do democratic electoral politics. Equally important, it was a unique and historic exercise in citizen engagement. Generally voters are allowed to do little more than pass judgment on their politicians every few years. The Assembly was

an attempt to turn them into real citizens – to make them active partners in a democratic decision-making exercise. Thus, irrespective of the outcome of the electoral system outcome on May 17, the Assembly needs to be assessed on its own terms. I believe it was a success: it met, it worked effectively, and it produced a thoughtful report that fulfilled its mandate. While future Assemblies will build on its practice, its experience offers several important lessons.

- Citizens want to contribute to making important decisions for their society  
Few of the citizens whose names were drawn by the computer at Elections BC knew much about electoral systems at the time; most were not particularly highly politicized. Yet they responded enthusiastically to the invitation to join the Assembly and many spent upwards of 30-40 days of hard work mastering the philosophical and technical intricacies of a relatively esoteric subject. I have little doubt that most of them would have responded to a similar project whatever the policy area. They participated because they saw in the Citizens' Assembly an opportunity to be part of something larger than themselves, and because membership offered them an opportunity to make a significant contribution to their society. Their real complaint is that others did not have this opportunity and that there are not more ways in which citizens can be genuinely involved in public decision-making.
- 'Ordinary' citizens can master complex issues. One of the conceits of professionals is that their subjects are so specialized and complex that only those who have spent years studying a subject, or working in the area, can be expected to contribute to policy in the area. The experience of the Citizens' Assembly makes it clear that this is simply not true. Members overcame the jargon and soon learned what they needed to know about electoral systems – whether it be how Finnish open lists or regional d'Hondt allocations worked, or what the implications for governmental accountability was under

different types of electoral regimes. And they focused on the theory and practical experience of the connections between these institutional realities and the important underlying values of political communities. All they needed were the tools and the motivation. The Assembly experience demonstrates how citizens can have both.

- Deliberative decision-making can work. Westminster-style parliamentary government is fundamentally adversarial with Government and Opposition each simply trying to mobilize sufficient resources to overwhelm the other and claim complete victory. There is little effort in our Parliament, or our provincial Legislatures, to have any real engagement that might develop mutually acceptable accommodations. But the Assembly members demonstrated that, given the will, this sort of political give-and-take is possible. Their electoral reform recommendation emerged through a process of respectful discussion and debate in which members were committed to developing a proposal that best balanced the concerns of all, not just some engineered majority. Building broad consensus takes time and work, but it offers an escape from the disenchantment many have with the sterility of our contemporary parliamentary politics.
- Citizens define problems, and so solutions, differently than established elites. This is hardly a new lesson, although one we are too inclined to forget. In the 1980s the Charter of Rights and Freedoms proved more popular among citizens than the constitution-negotiating politicians who finally consented to it. Then, in the 1990s, the electorate rejected the Charlottetown Accord which had virtually the entire Canadian political class pushing it. Now citizens in British Columbia have demonstrated that they define and value electoral democracy rather differently than the experts and professional politicians. If we are truly concerned for our democratic malaise, this is a lesson that ought to make us think about the path to meaningful reform.
- Diverse, multi-cultural groups can make principled, value-based decisions. British Columbia, like much of urban Canada, is now one of the most diverse multi-cultural societies. One of our great challenges is to find ways in which peoples who come from very different religious, cultural and political traditions can work together in a democratic society that respects the perspectives and values of all its members. Despite their varied backgrounds and experiences, Assembly members demonstrated that they could work together to balance competing representational principles and political values and to make a decision about what kind of electoral system would be best for their entire society.