TURNING VOTERS INTO CITIZENS: THE CITIZENS' ASSEMBLY AND REFORMING DEMOCRATIC POLITICS[1]

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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 restructure the way they practice democracy. By this I mean that the very values and principles that have long underlain the electoral system – one of the central institutions of the country's democracy – are now being seriously challenged and news practices proposed. During the year, a series of hard decisions will be taken, some by the voters themselves, on whether to adopt new mechanisms for conducting general elections which could transform the relationship between voter support, parliamentary strength and government formation. If the decisions are for change, then party politics, electoral competition and government accountability will be dramatically altered; if the decisions are to

maintain the status quo, then the impetus for change will have been lost, and the democratic malaise that haunts the land may endure.

Few deny that Canadian politics is suffering from a democratic malaise. The Prime Minister himself has made much of what he calls a 'democratic deficit,' first when campaigning for his party's leadership, and then in the succeeding general election. Canadians themselves have been telling pollsters for years that they don't trust politicians or their parties; and measures of public cynicism about the political process are high. And this pronounced disenchantment with our democratic system has been reflected in practice.

Political parties are the principal instruments by which citizens can define their public agenda, manage electoral competition, and control their politicians, yet few Canadians any longer join or participate in them. The rate of party membership is among the lowest in the democratic world. Even more dramatic is the sharp decline in electoral participation. Voter turnout hit an historic low in the last (2004) federal general election and the evidence of generational withdrawal from electoral politics suggests it is very likely to continue to drop in the future. While falling voter turnout is an issue in much of the western democratic world, the decline seems sharpest and most severe in Canada.

Responses to malaise vary. In Ottawa, Prime Minister Martin has argued that the problem is that parliamentarians are not seen to be representative of their electorates nor responsive to their voters. His proposed remedy is a series of in-house changes to the rules and practices of the Commons. Bogged down in a minority parliament he never anticipated, he has yet to demonstrate these changes will engage Canadians or fundamentally alter the character of our politics. In the provinces, the responses have been different. This undoubtedly reflects the experience of provincial competition in recent years. Three aspects of that experience stand out.

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 maker 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

and adopt quite different electoral systems for their own use. But this is how it should be in a federation where the provinces are unique and distinct political communities.

The other unprecedented aspect of this reform impulse is the trust shown by several of these premiers in the citizens of their provinces. In several of these cases (British Columbia, New Brunswick, Prince Edward Island – and perhaps Ontario) the premier has indicated he is prepared to trust the people to decide on any proposed electoral system change in a referendum. In the past, when provincial electoral systems were altered it was typically at the behest of the government of the day seeking some partisan advantage. This move towards popular decision making represents a major transformation in our democratic practices. It remains to be seen if, and how, the electorate will respond to the challenge.

THREE APPROACHES TO ELECTORAL REFORM

An electoral reform process rooted in the provinces is likely to be marked by the political realities of their individual party systems. Changes are likely to take on the distinctive colourings and perceived needs of the various provincial political communities. Thus, the reform initiatives that are coming to decision in 2005 reflect their different origins and the distinctive processes that gave them birth. It is important to consider this origin–process–proposal linkage if we are to make sense of the choices Canadians are being offered. Three provinces now have concrete proposals on the table – in Quebec, New Brunswick and British Columbia – and a comparison of them will reveal much about the dynamics of the electoral reform process.

In Quebec the issue of electoral reform has been on (and off) the political agenda for several decades. First embraced by the Levesque Parti Québécois (PQ) government in the mid-1970s, there have been green papers, legislative committee discussions, conferences and meetings of an Estates General, but little ability to come to closure on the issue. At heart, the

problem was that the PQ had many supporters of Proportional Representation (PR) in its ranks while its Liberal opponents believed in the existing system. That was an ironic constellation of forces given that FPTP has long systematically discriminated against the Liberals who attract much of their support from the geographically concentrated English-speaking minority. This is what Louis Massicotte (of the Université de Montréal) has called a 'linguistic gerrymander' and his best estimates suggest that the Liberals must have between 5–7% more votes simply to win the same number of seats as their opponents. Breaking the logjam on reform required getting a Liberal government to decide that this was too high a price to pay and that only some form of proportional electoral system could eliminate the partisan discrimination they suffered under FPTP.

New Brunswick's case was quite different. There the major problem has been one of a series of dysfunctional legislatures as the electoral system continued to produce overwhelming majorities – first for the Liberals, then the Conservatives – leaving an ineffective opposition incapable of playing the role expected of it in a parliamentary system. The province needs a system that produces a more balanced and representative legislature.

Two features of provincial life make this especially relevant in New Brunswick. First is the linguistic duality of the country's only bilingual province. The two communities are geographically concentrated in different parts of the province so the FPTP system aggravates the ability of the major parties to accommodate the two groups' distinctive interests and concerns. The second particular problem stems from the reality that about one-third of New Brunswick's population lives in unincorporated areas. For those people, their local MLA constitutes the only elected connection to government they have. Voters in such areas without a representative in the government caucus have no electoral access to politicians able to respond effectively to their service needs. With the province's strong two-party system producing majority governments, electoral reform in New Brunswick depended upon a premier rising

above the short-term interests of his party to recognize that fundamental change might strengthen the system. Given the province's delicate political balance, change had to be skilfully negotiated in a way that recognizes and protects the interests of both linguistic communities.

British Columbia's case for electoral reform seems less obvious or pressing. It is true that the elections of 1996 and 2001 produced 'wrong winners' and over-sized governments in quick succession, but these outcomes reflected the natural working of the FPTP system and the second result might simply be seen as righting the first. However, those events spoke to a growing set of voices in the province that were arguing that the polarization of political debate, the highly centralized practices of decision-making, and the sharp swings of public policy that followed government change, did not serve the province well. Their solution was for a transformed political culture and a healthier balance between the legislature and the executive. To get there, electoral reform was seen as a necessary first step.

Voices for change often cry in the political wilderness – in this case they were heard by the Liberal party leader Gordon Campbell who committed himself, and his party, to a democratic reform agenda. His proposed changes included fixed election dates and open cabinets but the central piece was to be a serious consideration of electoral reform.

So in these three very different provinces the motivations to consider electoral reform were quite distinct. In Quebec, there was a clear incentive for the government (but not the opposition) to abandon a system with a built-in partisan bias; in New Brunswick there was a real need to provide for balanced legislatures and a more regionally representative party system; in British Columbia there was a hope that the ills of polarization, centralization and inequity might be ameliorated.

In each case the workings of the First-Past-the-Post system was seen as the problem. In all the cases some form of proportional representation was identified (explicitly or implicitly) as an integral part of any likely solution. Elections are no longer seen as the sum of a series of discrete local contests, they are understood as province-wide events. This means that there needs to be a clear relationship between votes won and seats gained for outcomes to be regarded as fair and legitimate. Few were calling for perfect proportionality of the Dutch or Israeli kind, but in each case it was precisely the lack of any semblance of proportionality that needed to be changed. At the same time, however, the traditions of local representation inherent in a system of single-member electoral districts are deeply engrained in the culture and organization of our politics and few are prepared to see it disappear.

This left all the provinces with much the same problem for proportionality, and the kind of local representation that FPTP produces, are generally held to be incompatible. In principle, this ruled out changes to a PR list system such as used in much of Europe, or to a majoritarian system whether of the Australian preferential or French two-ballot variety. Thus, before even starting to discuss possible new electoral systems, it appeared that their alternative was clear – some variety of Mixed-Member Proportional (MMP) system of the sort recently adopted in New Zealand, for the new Scottish and Welsh legislatures, and recommended (for our national politics) by the Law Commission of Canada. With a mix of both single member districts and party lists, the champions of such systems claim they combine the advantages of both proportional represenattion and effective local representation; opponents fear they simply incorporate the disadvantages of both. Of course mixed systems come in many varieties and the devil would inevitably be in the details proposed. The question was who would do the proposing.

Recall the central motivations driving the electoral reform agenda in the three provinces. Quebec had a narrow goal – it wanted to eliminate the linguistic gerrymander. New Brunswick had broader ambitions – it wanted to provide for a more representative and balanced party and parliamentary system. British

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 proposals for change, in each of the provinces.

The draft bill now before the National Assembly in Quebec City is the classic product of insiders.[2] The premier appointed a Minister to shepherd the file who promptly recruited a technical expert from outside the public service and coupled him with his office staff. This team did a good deal of careful and detailed research, testing many dozens of different electoral system scenarios against provincial electoral patterns, and consulting with the relevant political actors in the parties and the Assembly. The result was what might be described as a safe mixed member system, one designed 'to not frighten the horses'. It will provide for proportionality but, with a large number of small regions and by giving voters only one vote, it represents a relatively conservative reform. The dominant position of the major parties will not be threatened, voters will have no more choice than they do now, and politicians will discover that there are likely more safe seats in the provincial legislature than in the past.

New Brunswick, with a broader agenda, established a more open process for developing an alternative electoral system model, but did so in a familiar and traditional way. The premier appointed a nine-person Commission on Legislative Democracy whose membership carefully balanced language, region, gender and partisanship. There was to be no doubt as to the outcome for commission members were instructed to recommend the best PR system for the province that would incorporate familiar principles of local representation. [It should be noted that their mandate directed the Commission to several other important aspects of the province's democratic life and while their report has many thoughtful and far-reaching recommendations on them, I am concerned here only with their proposals for a new electoral

system.] The commission's final report recommends a mixed member model, but one that is considerably different, and proposes more significant changes, than does Quebec's.[3] There will be fewer and so larger regions, voters will have 2 votes, politicians will have to choose which half of the system to operate in, and party nomination practices will be opened to a democratic vote by party members.

British Columbia, with the most general ambition, created a unique and quite unprecedented process for considering reform. The government decided to hold a Citizens' Assembly that would enable the province's citizens to decide how they wanted to conduct their elections. Politicians are generally loath to give up control over the rules of the electoral game by which they live, but with no pre-determined outcome to which they were committed the British Columbia government did just that. The Assembly met for a year and produced a report recommending, not another version of a mixed member system as many expected, but the adoption of the Single Transferable Vote (STV).[4] In many ways this is the most radical of the three proposals and, if adopted, is likely to produce the greatest change: for voters –who will have a preferential ballot, for politicians –who will all have to compete for their seats, and for the parties –whose internal dynamics will surely be transformed.[5]

There seems an obvious pattern in this story. The province with the narrowest agenda used political and bureaucratic insiders to fashion a reform that would be comparatively safe for its political class. The province with the most general goals adopted an open process that gave

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[2] The Bill can be found at: http://www.assnat.qc.ca/eng/37legislature1/Av-projets/04-aAVPL_LE.htm.

[3] The Commission's Final Report can be found at: www.gnb.ca/0100/FinalReport-e.pdf.

[4] The Final Report with the full details of the recommendation can be found at: www.citizensassembly.bc.ca.

[5] Under the proposed STV system voters will cast a preferential ballot in multi-member districts (the Assembly recommends from 2 to 7) and candidates will be required to achieve the droop quota to be elected. Second (and subsequent) preferences will be counted if a voter's preferred candidate is either already elected or eliminated.

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, with a comparatively middling agenda, entrusted its reform planning to neither complete insiders nor outsiders (though, if truth be told, they were much closer to being insiders than outsiders) who produced an electoral system model that went further than Quebec's but looks much less radical than British Columbia's.

Does this story foretell the prospects for these electoral reforms? Is the relatively conservative Quebec scheme, proposed by the experts and party professionals, more likely to be adopted and implemented than the unheralded BC-STV proposal of 160 randomly drawn citizens? That, of course, is what 2005 will tell. But there is no reason to think Quebec's narrow agenda–insider crafted–conservative reform scenario has a greater chance of success than British Columbia's wide agenda–outsider built–big change proposal. The reason is that the Quebec proposal, designed as it was, and with obvious partisan implications, must pass through the unpredictable shoals of the National Assembly where individual politicians and opposition parties will test it against their self-interest and may ultimately derail it. In British Columbia the final decision, like the proposal, is in the hands of political outsiders – the province's electorate. Its fate will be decided not in the legislature's back-rooms but at the ballot box on May 17.

SO WHAT DID HAPPEN IN BRITISH COLUMBIA?

Having decided to put the question of electoral reform on their agendas, there was nothing very surprising about the way in which Quebec and New Brunswick went about dealing with it. Both adopted well-practiced versions of politics as usual. It is the British Columbia story that is different. By turning the issue over to the voters, the province took a giant step in the direction of meaningful public engagement; it trusted that voters could be citizens. This experiment deserves more attention, and prompts us to ask about the voters who

responded to the challenge and why they made the decisions they did. What made this first experiment in fashioning a new tool of democratic engagement a success, and what broader lessons does it have for us? Let me say something about each of these questions.

The plan for a Citizens' Assembly on Electoral Reform was crafted by a prominent British Columbian at the request of the government and subsequently endorsed by the Legislative Assembly. The idea was that a randomly selected group of citizens would be asked to review the electoral system and consider whether there might be an alternative that would suit the politics and governance of the province better. If the Assembly so decided, it was to recommend a detailed alternative for the electorate to decide on.

To fulfill their mandate the Assembly members would have to learn about the principles and practices of electoral systems (the equivalent of a third year university political science course), receive submissions and conduct extensive public hearings, and then find a way to discuss what they had learned and heard to come to a conclusion and recommendation. The details of how all this was accomplished is reported in the Assembly's Technical Report. Here let me say something about who these members were.

The 160 British Columbians who constituted the Assembly were a remarkably representative group. The demography of the membership reflected the province's population: their age distribution was a closer match than is the voters' list; members came from the wide variety of ethnic backgrounds that make-up the electorate; and their occupational and educational experience reflected that of the electorate.[6] Like British Columbians, they came from all over the world (40% were born in the province, 30% in ROC and 30% from abroad) but, unlike the province's legislature, the membership was gender balanced.

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[6] Membership data comes from a benchmark survey conducted by the research staff of the Assembly.

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.

- Gender Balance – While it is difficult to pin down precisely how this made a difference virtually all members believed it did. At a minimum they believed it contributed in a powerful way to engendering a more civil and respectful dialogue process. As no elected legislature in the country had ever been gender balanced before, this feature of the Assembly enhanced the members' sense of participating in a legitimate and progressive democratic exercise.

- Important Task – There was no doubt that members were being asked to deal with a fundamentally important question. The electoral system is at the institutional heart of our democratic practice. Members knew they had the opportunity to make a contribution of major importance to the public life of their province and this reality stimulated their commitment, to the task and to each other.

- Independence – The Assembly was given compete independence from the existing political elites and the system's governing organizations. This freed them from the kinds of partisan interests that working politicians inevitably have. It allowed members to proceed as they saw fit and provided assurance to the wider public that their report and recommendations would reflect their best judgment as independent, concerned citizens.

- Power – With the assurance that any recommendation would go directly to the people of the province in a referendum, the members knew they were not simply writing another report destined for a library shelf. This provided a powerful incentive for them to work together and fulfill their assigned mandate.

Beginning in January 2004, with many having little real sense of the magnitude of the challenge ahead, Assembly members worked hard for a full year and in December recommended to the province that the long-familiar First-Past-the-Post electoral system be replaced by the Single Transferable Vote, a

system the great majority had never heard of when they started. As I have already noted this is not the option that the experts and professionals in other provinces are touting. The question we need to ask is why they made this choice.

THE SURPRISING BC-STV RECOMMENDATION

The Citizens' Assembly members were determined to anchor their analysis and any recommendation in a clearly articulated set of values. What kind of electoral system British Columbia should use would depend upon what kind of political community British Columbians wanted, and how its values could be articulated in its electoral institutions. Assembly members were aware that the electoral system was only one part of a more complex set of governing arrangements but they also knew that, as the mechanism for linking voters to government, it had the power to shape the conduct of political competition and the character of political representation.

After careful consideration and long discussions the Assembly resolved that an appropriate electoral system ought to provide for the best possible balance between three key values – effective local representation, fair (defined as proportional) electoral outcomes, and voter choice. Knowing that both coalition and minority governments are successful in many other democratic countries led the Assembly to conclude that the artificial production of single-party majority governments was not an essential criteria against which to judge electoral systems.

For most Assembly members FPTP failed on all three of their standards. Though it provides for identifiable local representatives, they see the practices of party discipline turning MLAs into Victoria's representatives to their communities rather than allowing MLAs to act as the local voters' representative to Victoria. Members did not accept that putting party interests, and votes, ahead of community welfare constituted effective local representation. Of course, the FPTP system is not designed to

produce electoral outcomes that reflect party support across the province as the recent elections had made only too clear. And at the polling place, FPTP typically asked voters to choose between two or three individuals, the crudest kind of choice in a world in which citizens make sophisticated choices every day.

It was an explicit commitment to finding a system that would address and balance all three of these values that led Assembly members to their recommendation for STV. In the other provinces, those recommending change were principally focused on the proportionality issue and believed that simply compensating for the large swings and distortions inherent in FPTP was all that was necessary. Most Assembly members thought otherwise. They believed that a system in which a majority of the members were still elected by FPTP rules could not challenge the heavy hand of party discipline which inhibits genuinely local representation.

Mixed Member Proportional systems are party-centred mechanisms, Single Transferable Vote systems are voter-centred processes, and this central difference spoke to the members. It was precisely the combination of proportional outcomes, combined with far more local responsiveness through greater voter choice, which appealed to Assembly members who were assessing the merits of an electoral system from the perspective of ordinary voters.

STV was a 'surprising' recommendation because, though it works successfully in a few places, it has not been widely adopted. It is easy to see why when we consider the perspectives of those generally involved in determining what electoral system to use. Governments (and first ministers) generally prefer systems that produce majorities that allow them an easy dominance of the legislature. As a proportional system, STV doesn't promise that and will eliminate the artificial majorities we have been used to in this country. Political parties are not likely to be keen on STV for it strengthens the control of ordinary voters as compared to the party bosses and elites who would have an enhanced influence in any system (such as MMP) that

involves ordering lists of party candidates. By socializing local intra-party competition STV, is also likely to weaken (or at least transform) the capacity of parties to discipline their members. Politicians are reluctant to embrace STV for it eliminates safe seats and makes all constituency level politics competitive. As a consequence elected politicians have to be more responsive to their voters and find politically acceptable ways to balance the competing demands of effective local representation with party loyalty.

Of course governments, parties and politicians are precisely the actors who play a central role in most electoral system decision-making. That was the case in both Quebec and New Brunswick where their interests were well represented in the reform processes and recommendations. If they were to move towards a proportional system then their interest was in strengthening the parties and their ability to discipline their members – hence their Mixed Member system recommendations. In British Columbia the process effectively shut those groups out and made the Assembly's 'ordinary voters' the key decision-makers.

Voters bring a different set of priorities to a consideration of the democratic process. Concerned with issues of fairness, choice and representation, they are likely to be more enthusiastic about STV than the professional politicians for, among other things, it promises them:

- More choice. Voters can rank candidates in the order of their choice, voting a party ticket or selecting from among the candidates of different parties.

- Diverse candidate slates. The use of multi-member districts gives parties a strong incentive to produce a balanced team of candidates that reflects the social and cultural diversity of the district.

- Greater Responsiveness. With opening intra-party competition to the electorate politicians must work harder at being responsive to their voters in order to hold

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.

- 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.

- 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.