



# **The BC Citizens' Assembly on Electoral Reform**

## ***An Innovative Exercise in Citizen Decision-Making***

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**R. Kenneth Carty**

*The University of British Columbia*



# Citizens' Assemblies & Political Reform or *Who Should be Deciding the Rules of the Game*



**Politicians**

*or*

**Citizens**



## Oireachtas

### *Joint Committee on the Constitution*

In order to de-politicise any reform process, [the Committee] proposes the establishment of a Citizens' Assembly to examine the performance of PR-STV in Ireland, and if it deems that reforms are necessary, to propose changes.

***Fourth Report - July 2010***

## Some Big Questions

- What is a Citizens' Assembly ?
- Why would one want one ?
- How do they work ?
- Can ordinary citizens really make these kind of policy decisions ?



## Oireachtas

### *Joint Committee on the Constitution*

It is the opinion of the Committee that the establishment of such an Assembly would facilitate greater popular engagement with the democratic institutions as well as enhancing the legitimacy of any proposed reform.

# A Citizens' Assembly

## *Lessons from British Columbia*

- The story
- What happened
- How and Why did it turn out as it did
- What can we learn from that experience

# The Impulse to Reform

- Recognizing a “Democratic Deficit”
  - *growing public cynicism and distrust*
  - *falling voter turnout*
  - *declining party memberships*
  - *dysfunctional electoral outcomes*
- Opposition parties pledged to reform
- The failure of traditional engagement mechanisms
  - *fail to engage general public*
  - *dominated by “interested” publics*
  - *don’t link public opinion and public action*

*try a new approach to reform?*



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# BC's Citizens' Assembly on Electoral Reform

- Designed to attack the *Democratic Deficit* by cutting out *politicians* given their conflict of interest
- Challenged *Citizens* to determine how to organize their common political life by deciding what sort of *electoral system* they needed and wanted
- A leap in the dark

*It had never been done before*

## but . . . Can Citizens Make Policy ?

**?** Can a representative group be assembled

**?** Can ordinary citizens acquire the required knowledge and expertise

**?** Can they be engaged enough to do the necessary hard work

**?** Can ordinary citizens balance:

- *public & private* interests
- *short and long-term* considerations
- *tangible & intangible* impacts
- *personal & collective* concerns

and then make decisions that require value trade-offs

# British Columbia (a digression)

- on Canadian west coast
- 4.5 million population  
(almost half in major city)
- 950,000 km<sup>2</sup>  
(~ Italy + Germany + UK + Ireland)
- 75% mountainous; 60% forested
- two time zones
- 2-party Westminster politics  
FPTP electoral system



# The Citizens' Assembly Story

1. What was the BC Citizens' Assembly *mandate & membership*
2. How did it operate
3. Why did the process work
4. The basis for Assembly success
5. What lessons can we learn
6. Can Assemblies drive reform

# The Assembly's Mandate

1. **Analyze** BC's Electoral & Parliamentary Politics
2. **Consider** alternative electoral systems
3. **Consult** fellow citizens
4. **Deliberate** to make best judgment
5. **Recommend** *status quo* or a detailed alternative
6. **Submit** any proposed change to referendum

# The Assembly's Membership

- 160 individuals drawn *at random* from the voters' list (*politicians excluded*)
- Gender and age balanced; representative of the diverse population (*occupation, education, origin, ethnicity*)
- Participating as *individual citizens*, not as representatives of groups or interests
- Few knew much about electoral systems (*when they started!*)
- Desire to do something for their province

# The Assembly's 3 Phase Process

## 1. Learn about electoral systems

- conceptually and technically complex new subject
- a political science 'boot camp' over 6 residential weekends [*Jan–Mar '04*]

## 2. Listen to the Public

- 50 public hearings [*May – June 2004*]
- over 1600 written submissions

## 3. Deliberate & Decide recommendation

- another 6 residential weekends [*Sept – Nov 2004*]
- identifying core values
- building detailed alternative models
- debating & deciding what to recommend

(Members decided by 146 – 7 to recommend **STV** over **FPTP**)

# 160 Citizens assembled



# Intense Discussions



**High School  
Teacher**

**Community  
Activist**

**Fish Camp  
Operator**

**WalMart  
Manager**

**Dentist**

# Debating Values & Principles



**Ice Breaker Ship's  
Captain**

**Homesteading  
Farmer**



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# Why did it work ?

- Members invested time and effort
  - *30 – 40 days: meetings & independent research and study*
  - *only 1 drop out*
  - *near 'perfect' attendance*
- Members learned and were transformed from passive voters to engaged citizens
  - *became more interested, attentive, informed & active*
- Members found ways to root their discussions, debates and final decisions in agreed values
  - *values to govern process; values to underlie decision*
- Members reached final decisions by seeking consensus, not an adversarial majority vote

# Some Important Lessons

- ☑ Citizens want to contribute to making important decisions
- ☑ 'Ordinary' citizens can master complex materials
- ☑ Deliberative decision-making can work
- ☑ Diverse multi-cultural groups can make principled, value-based decisions
- ☑ Citizens will define problems, and thus solutions, differently than established elites

# The Ingredients for Success

- ☑ Random selection of members
  - ↪ *provided legitimacy for individual members*
- ☑ Gender Balance
  - ↪ *created civil discourse & sense of representativeness*
- ☑ Important Task
  - ↪ *gave members a raison d'être*
- ☑ Independence from Government
  - ↪ *allowed Assembly to control its operation*
- ☑ Significant Power
  - ↪ *generated incentive to do the work*
- ☑ Impartial Leadership
  - ↪ *freed members to take ownership*

# Assembly Success . . . Reform Failure

- ✓ Assembly STV proposal goes directly to referendum 6 months later
- ✓ Double threshold: 60% popular vote & 50% in 60% of districts
- ✓ Low information campaign  
political leaders & major parties refuse to take sides
- ✓ Referendum gets 58% passes in 77 of 79 districts

Yes voters were those who knew about CA or STV proposal

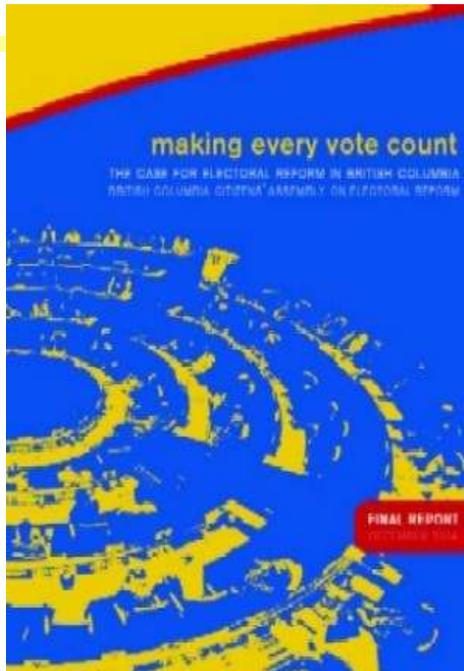
- ✓ Legislature deems referendum (and reform) to have lost

## Some final thoughts . . .

- Citizen Assembly process worked
  - *citizens reached consensus*
  - *participants reported high satisfaction*
  - *process successfully replicated in Netherlands and Ontario*
- Not connected to referendum process
- ❓ Can deliberative citizen mechanisms be integrated with populist mechanisms
- ❓ Are they even logically compatible
- ❓ And are either easily integrated with traditional representative institutions



# For more



## Assembly

[www.citizensassembly.bc.ca](http://www.citizensassembly.bc.ca)

## Randomocracy

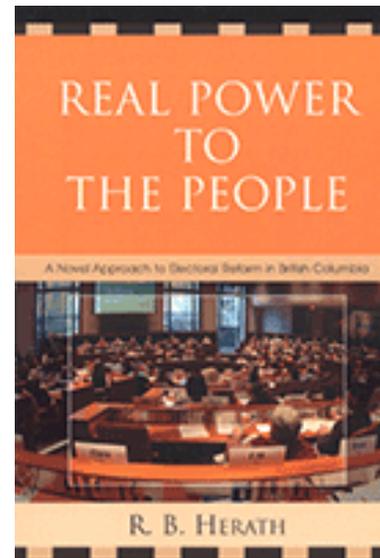
A Citizen's Guide  
to Electoral Reform in British Columbia



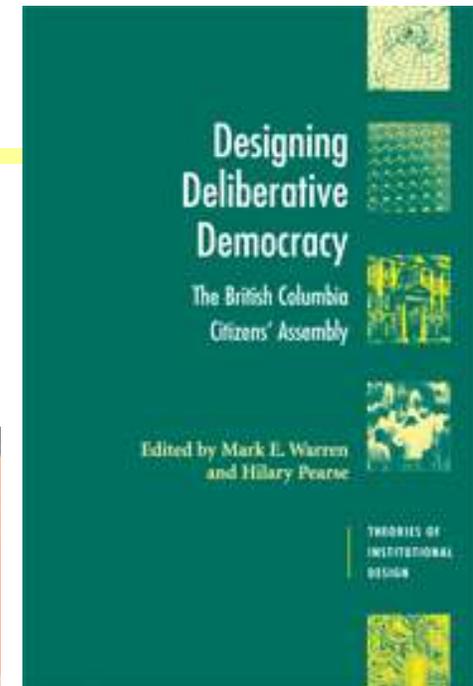
Why the B.C. Citizens Assembly recommends  
the single transferable-vote system

Jack MacDonald

## Members



## Academics



and coming soon: **When Citizens Decide (OUP)**



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