

Parliament and Democracy in the 21st Century: The Case Against Proportional Representation

Electing members of a Parliament is not an end in itself. These persons chosen in some manner may assemble and offer their opinions at chosen times but the purpose of choosing members is to permit the formation of a government from amongst those MLAs supported by the voters.

Debate in the legislative assembly may be entertaining, enlightening and important but unless someone is listening and in authority to act on the matters discussed and decided then there is little purpose of having members.

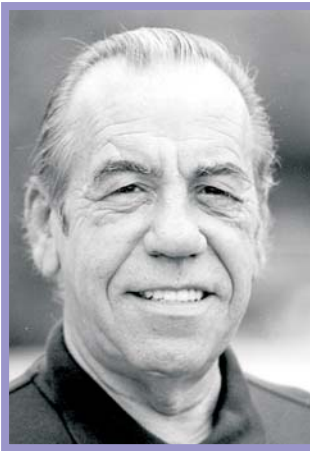
Therefore a government must be created from among the members chosen. The best manner for a government to be chosen is for a party to have a majority of seats in the house and be called upon to form a government and then provide the needed leadership required to conduct public business.

Proportional representation tends to foster minority government and history would suggest most citizens do not want minority government. British Columbia elections have been held along party lines since 1903 and there have been only three instances of a minority government resulting from a general election — in 1924, 1941 and 1952. If the voters of British Columbia believed minority government was the preferred option then the results of those elections would reflect that opinion. Of the 28 governments elected since 1903 twenty five have been majorities.

Coalition governments leave much to be desired. Too often a small faction can hold the balance of power and use that to secure objectives considered important or urgent by a small number of people but not always in the best interest of the general public.

Since 1903 about 800 British Columbians have been successful in their quest for a seat in the legislative assembly of our province. An examination of those chosen shows a record of community involvement, elected or otherwise, for the most part. Traditionally, among the more established political parties, successful candidates must submit to a rigorous process beginning with the recruitment of supporters within the

constituency organization then to the nomination meeting and from there to the election itself. Often the process may require commitment for a couple of years before the election. During that time these hopeful residents of British Columbia will submit to close scrutiny by their peers the media and ultimately the voter. Only those with a desire to serve all of the people in the riding are most often successful. The process soon eliminates those that might be involved as a lark or a sudden impulse. While not infallible it is a good test to determine sincerity and commitment of candidates.



In a democratic society it is important to avoid either the tyranny of the majority or the tyranny of the minority. Population numbers provide the Greater Vancouver area with the majority of seats in any provincial legislature. That population and its power should be restricted to the greater Vancouver area. Any residual voter's preference should not find its way into outlying constituencies where the preference of residents may not be consistent with those within a major metropolitan area.

It is important for residents to have a sense of community and control over the results of an election within their riding. The determination of a representative should be in the hands of the voters within their electoral boundaries. British Columbia is made up of communities, large or small, and the attitudes vary greater depending upon their choice of location. Do not impose an outside influence on our choice of choosing our representative.

There always will be those that choose to march to the beat of their own drummer. Just because these extreme attitudes exist does mean we should be subjected to their inclusion as part of our government system. Our tradition suggests minority points of view and extreme attitudes often can find a place within established political parties. Should others choose to believe only they have the answers then they are destined to be apart and for the most part alone.

Some jurisdictions have opted for different methods of choosing their representatives for a myriad of reasons over time. Their experiences are relative to their needs but not to the needs of British Columbia. Our sys-

tem has served us well for more than a century. Those that participated in the political world of our province over those years were not without knowledge and wisdom.

Citizens of British Columbia have been choosing their representatives for the most part over 133 years by permitting the candidate with the greatest support in a riding to represent the residents in Victoria.

The system was adopted from our federal system of choosing MPs and before than the traditional method of elected members in the United Kingdom. Over the centuries many minds have considered the process and while a multitude of changes have occurred relating to the details of the election laws the concept of having a winner as chosen by the people within a geographical area has remained constant.

Would a system that incorporates the requirement of a majority of votes cast in a riding before a candidate is said to be elected improve our system? We have experienced the results of such an experiment under the alternative voting system method in 1952 and again in 1953. It was discarded.

If we are to maintain confidence in our system and government then the people of the province must accept the election results. There will al-

ways be those wishing to keep the political wars on fire between elections and they have the right so to do. It is important that citizens of British Columbia, potential investors to our province and those with whom the province does business including the public service have a period of time during which there is stability and predictability. When an election campaign is over it should be over and the chosen government must get on with the job.

For all these reasons I support the present first past the post system and oppose any change to proportional representation.

Jim Nielsen served for eleven years as MLA for Richmond in the British Columbia Legislature. He is a former Minister of the Environment, Minister of Consumer and Corporate Affairs, Minister of Health and Minister of Social Services. A journalist and member of the Peachland Council he addressed the British Columbia Citizens' Assembly at its regional hearings in Kelowna on June 24, 2004 and was one of nine persons selected to return and address the entire Assembly. This article is a slightly revised version of his address to the Citizens' Assembly on September 11, 2004.