



FPSE **UPDATE** **ISSUES**

#6

Electoral Reform: BC's proposal for a Single Transferable Vote (STV)



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When BC voters head to their local polling station on May 12, 2009, they will be doing more than electing a provincial government. This year's ballot will also ask voters whether they endorse a system of electoral reform known as Single Transferable Vote (STV). This proposal was first presented to BC voters in the 2005 provincial election. Although the STV proposal received majority support at the time, it did not garner the support needed to implement a new system of voting and electoral boundaries.

At our AGM in May 2008, delegates approved the following motion:

That FPSE commit resources to educate its members about the referendum on the BC electoral system, which will be held at the same time as the provincial election in May 2009.

This Update reviews the STV proposal for electoral reform. It relies on research done by the BC Federation of Labour's Political Action Committee which produced a comprehensive review of both the STV proposal and another form of electoral reform called Mixed Member Proportional (MMP) voting. That review was included in the Committee's report to the 2008 Constitutional Convention.

Electoral reform has long been an active debate within the ranks of the labour movement, amongst community organizations and even within established political parties. The common thread in all those debates is

the concern that our current system of "first past the post" doesn't fully reflect the diversity of views within the electorate or fully balance the input of various regions within a province or across a country.

BC is not the only province to wrestle with this debate over how best to reform its electoral system. For example, over two years ago Ontario did a review of its electoral system. The conclusion there was to advance the MMP option.

The electoral reform process and the Citizens' Assembly in BC

In 2004, the BC Liberal government created a body called the Citizens' Assembly (CA) made up of 160 randomly selected British Columbians. Their mandate was to assess different models for electing members to the Provincial Legislature and make recommendations on possible changes to the current system.

For most of 2004, the CA held public hearings and received written submissions to assist in the development of a recommendation to the voters in British Columbia. In the fall of 2004, the Assembly released its report and recommended that BC adopt a proportional system that they called BC-STV. The recommendation was presented to the electorate in 2005 as follows.

"Should British Columbia change to the BC-STV electoral system as recommended by the Citizens' Assembly on Electoral Reform? Yes/No"

While the referendum achieved 57.3 percent in popular support, it failed to meet the double majority test established by the provincial government, i.e., 60 percent in popular support in 60 percent of the current constituencies. Following the defeat of the referendum in 2005, the provincial government announced they would put the referendum to another vote in the 2009 provincial election.

Push for more choices on the 2009 electoral reform referendum

The CA heard submissions from academics and British Columbians in support of STV and other electoral systems. The submissions overwhelmingly recommended MMP. The Assembly then held an internal vote on whether to support a MMP system versus STV. The Assembly members voted to support STV.

While the Assembly is entitled to its opinion, many citizens and groups were upset that they were only given the choice between the status quo and STV. Many arguments were presented to the Assembly for a MMP system that is more common in other democracies. Some felt that the Assembly process was biased against MMP from the beginning.

However, it was clear to those who listened to the debate of the Assembly that the STV system was favoured because it appeared to favour individualism over the collective. In other words, the Assembly felt that the party structure prevented elected officials from serving the best interests of their constituents and if MLAs were not constrained by political parties they would be freer to represent their constituents.

As was the case in 2005, the STV proposal is the only option that BC voters will be able to consider in the 2009 referendum. Other methods of electoral reform such as the MMP option will not be part of this year's referendum.

How BC-STV works

While STV is not a new system, it certainly is less known and used than its MMP counterpart. STV is currently used only in Ireland, Malta, the Australian senate and a few municipalities.

Under STV, voters rank candidates according to their preferences on

a ballot. Then all the candidates ranked first will be counted. If one or more candidates gets enough votes to exceed a pre-set number (established through a mathematical formula called the "Droop Quota"), he or she will be elected. All the ballots of the person(s) elected will then be assigned a "transfer value" based on a mathematical formula and those ballots will be transferred to the voter's second preference.

If after the transfer of ballots, another candidate exceeds the Droop Quota, he or she will be elected. Their ballots will be assigned a transfer value and the 2nd preferences of some and 3rd preference of others will be counted, and so on.

If no candidate exceeds the Droop Quota, the candidate with the least amount of votes is dropped off the list and their 2nd choice will be transferred at full value. This process continues until all the positions are filled.

BC STV and the electoral map

In order for STV to work, there must be at least two MLA positions in each electoral district. This means the current electoral districts will be combined into groups of 2 to 7 and the number of MLAs will correspond to growth in the size of the electoral district.

In 2008, Elections BC released its boundaries under the proposed STV system, which reduced the number of electoral districts from 83 under

the current system down to 20 under STV. Three of the largest new electoral districts under STV take up half the province. The number of MLAs will still be the same as under the current system - 83 members. While there will be a corresponding increase in the number of MLAs in each district, each elected official will be responsible for their entire riding.

This issue may be of particular concern for rural area residents who already live in large geographic electoral districts and will now see the constituency at least double in size with very little increase in proportionality as a result of that trade-off.

Less power of political parties

Both proponents and critics have acknowledged that the explanation of how one is elected is complicated. However, the proponents of STV rationalize that this very complex voting system is exactly what is needed to reduce the power of political parties and strengthen the freedom of individual MLAs.

While one might agree that STV will lessen the ability of political parties to operate, the premise that political parties are inherently unaccountable and unproductive to achieving the wishes and needs of the electorate is questionable.

The role of the individual and special interest groups will increase under STV. The role that lobbying and lobbyists play in the political system will likely

become much more important, as they are in the US political system.

Implications of STV and the proportional representation model

It is important to note the term “proportional representation” has come to mean that parties gain seats in proportion to the number of votes cast for that party in an election. The answer to whether or not BC STV is proportional representation really depends on where you live.

A quote from the Citizens’ Assembly fact sheet:

“Once the number of seats per district drops below five, substantial reductions in proportionality occur”

This means if you live in an electoral district with five or more MLAs (usually urban areas), your chances of achieving proportionality will be greater than in electoral districts with less than five MLA’s (usually rural areas). Overall, in BC, STV will likely result in outcomes that are less proportional than outcomes from an MMP System.

Will BC-STV achieve diversity

The difficulty in answering this question lies in the very limited use of STV around the world. One analysis shows that in Malta, for example, women have been less successful in winning office than women who run in countries with MMP system or our own system of first-past-the-post system.

Similarly, in Ireland where STV is used, women are more under-represented than in places that use other systems to elect their representatives. However, the Irish system has also supported two women Presidents in the last fifteen years.

End to wasted ballots

STV proponents suggest that the new system will put an end to the concern expressed by some voters that “their votes are wasted” because they don’t influence the outcome or representation in their constituency. The reality, however, is that STV does not put an end to the so-called wasted vote complaint. As in other electoral systems, there will be those voters whose ballots will not contribute to the election of a local MLA. Under STV, some voters will have their second, third, and fourth preferences counted while others will not.

STV and collective action

It’s important to remember that the BC STV model is specifically designed to lessen the influence of political parties and increase the individual freedom of MLAs. This philosophy runs counter to the view of many within the labour movement who believe that strong collective action, either at the workplace or in the community, is the most effective way to achieve meaningful change. Just as unequal power at the workplace motivated individual workers to create unions in the first place, so too political parties give collective voice to the aspirations

of working people drowned out by the well-financed lobbyists and public relations campaigns of the wealthy. While STV purportedly reduces the influence of political parties on our MLAs and electoral system to the benefit of accountability to the citizens, it can also be argued that only political parties are in a position to offer a broad enough platform to which politicians can be held accountable. As well, having such a platform, endorsed by other MLAs who share a common set of principles and values, provides a level of transparency and accountability to voters.

Conclusion

BC Voters will have a second opportunity to consider the STV proposal for electoral reform. That proposal was on the 2005 provincial ballot, but failed to secure the necessary support to be implemented. Although the demand for electoral reform remains strong in many parts of BC, just exactly what that reform looks like varies considerably. Voters need to understand the options and implications of the specific reform proposal that is on this year's ballot. With better information, voters can make an informed choice on this very critical issue.