

CITIZENS' ASSEMBLY ON ELECTORAL REFORM
ANSWERS TO WRITTEN QUESTIONS SUBMITTED TO
KATHERINE GORDON

September 11, 2004

From Wendy Bergerud

Would you agree that MMP mixes two of the worst systems together: constituency seats selected by plurality votes and closed-list PR where the party leadership chooses who is at the top and their list? Would you agree that this is a "fix" of the FPTP system instead of an overhaul of our electoral system?

Answer:

No, and no.

MMP is a model that takes the best aspects of several systems to create something even better. It is not perfect but perfection is, I suspect, impossible.

Secondly, the mandate of the Citizens' Assembly requires it to look at, among other things, the *manner by which voters' ballots are translated into seats in the Legislative Assembly*. It seems to me a change to MMP falls squarely within that mandate.

From David Wills

I would be very pleased to hear your comments on the suggestions, made in some submissions to the Assembly, that the votes a losing candidate receives in an MMP local election should determine the ranking of the candidate on the party list.

The reason for my question is that I understand local elections in an MMP system appear to suffer some of the same problems that we have today under our Single Member Plurality system. Only a few candidates are viable in the local election and as a result I believe between 30% and 40% of the voters in New Zealand vote strategically in their local election. The above suggestion for using the votes of a losing candidate would seem to make the local election vote more meaningful for minor party candidates and may perhaps make the local election vote less of a strategic vote.

Answer:

Perhaps, although I see nothing wrong with strategic voting – the outcome is still whatever the voter wants. If the above suggestion is simply a different way of counting votes, I have nothing against it. In general, my emphasis is that a formula needs to be derived that translates votes as closely as possible to the appropriate number of seats in the house. Again, it won't be perfect but there is no reason a formula cannot be derived to achieve that effect, combining constituency votes with list votes and reducing the number of constituency ridings accordingly.

While I sympathize with the concerns of northern ridings that their geographical areas are very large and they don't want to see them even larger, at the same time, the corresponding concerns in the urban is that MLA's may have smaller distances to travel, but they have immensely larger constituent numbers to deal with. Until and unless the actual number of ridings can be increased, reducing riding sizes is the cost of ensuring a fairer voting system overall and the merits of the system outweigh the downsides of reducing riding sizes.

From John Zall

What position do you have on the single transferable vote?

Answer:

I prefer MMP because it is much more straightforward for the voter to see how his or her votes are translated into seats in the house. STV is still better than FPTP, because at least the result is more consistent with voter desires. However, I think the inherent flaw in STV is that voters – including me – don't have the time or capacity to know who all the candidates they are expected to rank are.

From John Zall

Do you advocate an open or closed list MMP system?

Answer:

I think a closed list works well, but don't have strong objections to open lists, especially if they provide greater voter choice. I don't agree with splitting party votes into regions, this is a provincial vote and I want politicians considering the interests of all British Columbians, not just their own region, which regionality invites

From Shoni Field

You point out that because in NZ riding MPs are considered to have higher status, list MP's in aspiring to make the shift to ridings, set up constituency offices in competition with local riding MP's. You said that this can result in turf wars. I have heard that this may have also led to citizens feeling like they were getting better service locally because of that competition and that they had a choice in whom to approach. To your knowledge, is there any research into increased/decreased levels of voter satisfaction with local service based on this phenomenon?

Answer:

I am not aware of any such research, just general national polling results indicating overall satisfaction with MMP and no desire to change it.

I agree that overall, competition between "list" MPs and constituency MPs (I consider both to have been elected, just by different means) works in favor of the voter. Turf wars are largely a thing of the past, now that people are used to the respective roles and perhaps partly as a result of greater caucus discipline.

From Anna Rankin

How important do you feel it is that the Citizens' Assembly consider recommending a system that considers the issue of women's representation? And if so, how might that look?

Answer:

I think that MMP works sufficiently in favor of minority or specific interest groups, and don't think any special system is required. In fact, I think that would be contrary to the spirit of MMP, designed to give the best possible effect to what voters want. I think if women want to be represented in government, they need to run for office.

From Sally de Luna

The similarity of New Zealand to British Columbia may make one think their electoral system is appropriate for BC. My question is do they identify with the problems of politics in B.C.?

Answer:

Yes. Politics in New Zealand are driven by much the same forces as in British Columbia: big business dollars; personal connections; the influence of a large economic power as an immediate neighbor; the power and influence of the United States; individual security issues; aboriginal interests; and labor interests. Prior to the introduction of MMP, New Zealand suffered in the same way as BC currently does from dominant and overly-influential lobby groups controlling governments with a disproportionate balance of seats in the House. New Zealand voters will recall this readily and be very sympathetic to the problems currently encountered in BC.

From Sally de Luna

My concern now is the two major parties according to your submission, might block the referendum process or use it according to their political advantage. Your comments, please.

Answer:

In my submission, I emphasized the need for political commitment to follow through on this process. Governments with majorities under FPTP don't like the idea of MMP – it is a system that favors the voter, and requires government to work harder for its constituents.

However, in New Zealand neither of the two major parties could face the embarrassment of backing down on political commitments in the face of strong public call for change.

In BC, both my local MLA Mike Hunter and Minister John Les have committed in a public meeting which I attended in July that the current provincial government will see this process through as promised.