

**CITIZENS' ASSEMBLY ON ELECTORAL REFORM**  
**ANSWERS TO WRITTEN QUESTIONS SUBMITTED TO**  
**IAN McKINNON**

**September 11, 2004**

**From Wendy Bergerud**

SMP assumes that we should be grouped by where we live. Why should our geographic location be our fundamental group association for elections?

*Answer:*

In looking over large, national, democratic electoral systems, the only one that I can see which does not use geography as a fundamental aspect of representation is the Israeli system which elects all 120 Members of the Knesset on a nation-wide basis.

There are some peculiar anomalies in specific systems that have resulted in non-geographic-based seats, but these are a real exception. As an example, until fifty years ago, university graduates in Britain had two votes: their regular constituency vote and an additional vote that was cast for the "university seats" (interestingly, some of those seats were decided using a form of proportional representation), which had no geographic basis.

Some non-democratic, or only partially democratic, systems have used non-geographic associations as the basis for legibility in elections. As examples, the apartheid-era South African system had a racially segregated franchise that excluded non-whites. Conversely, today, New Zealand has separate Maori seats, although Maoris may choose either to vote for those seats or to vote with the general electorate.

In the end, the use of geographic divisions as a basis for voting responds to a number of different needs. First, parliamentarians have become advocates or ombudsmen in addition to their role as legislators concerned with national issues. Geographic distribution of seats makes it easier for people to know who to go to with a problem. In multi-member districts or regions, the citizen has a choice of a number of representatives and may choose based on party, issue-interest or whatever else.

The additional benefit of a geographically-based voting system lies in its ability to reduce the complexity of choices facing the voter. If the voter wants to make her judgment based on the individuals to be elected as well as or instead of purely on party, a province-wide system will be formidably complex even for the most committed voter. Geographically-limited systems make the choices more manageable and increase the odds that the voter will be familiar with at least some of the candidates.

**From David Wills**

I am interested in your statement that the Westminster system does not deal well with minority Parliaments, that minority governments are unstable and the resulting frequent elections decrease turnout.

However, I note that two countries, Germany and Ireland, which use different types of proportional representation systems that have been recommended to the Assembly, have largely avoided frequent elections. Since 1948 Germany has had 15 elections and Ireland 17 while Canada has had 18 and BC 16. I believe that on only one occasion has a party in Germany gained enough votes to govern without a coalition partner and in Ireland there have been only three or four elections which resulted in one party have a majority of the seats.

I appreciate that Germany and Ireland do not use the Westminster system but what is it about the system of government these countries use that enables them to have seemingly stable government without one party having a majority in parliament?

I would also be interested in any examples you may have where countries that use a proportional electoral system **and** the Westminster system of government (e.g., New Zealand, Scotland and Wales) have suffered from back-room dealings and unstable government.

*Answer:*

First, I want to distinguish between changing governments frequently and having frequent elections. Many of the continental systems give a President the capacity to lead in forming a new government when an old government can no longer sustain the support of the legislature. In contrast, if one is likely to have frequent minorities, the practicalities of dealing with that situation are difficult in Canada. We do not have a system which encourages a Lieutenant Governor to become involved in the inevitably political task of helping create effective governing coalitions instead of calling for a new election.

One option is to change our constitutional practice which currently requires an election to be called after a government loses any of a number of different types of votes on the House. While the three smaller federal parties are trying to address this right now, we cannot say whether significant changes will result.

The stability of the German and Irish governments demonstrates to us that PR systems can be quite stable, although I would add that other PR systems (e.g., Italy or the French 4<sup>th</sup> Republic) have found it very difficult to maintain stable, effective governments. The German case I would put down, in part, to a broad consensus that the splintering of parties that helped bring down the Weimar Republic must not be repeated. I do not know the political history of Ireland as well; however, I would point to the substantial dominance of a single party, Fianna Fail, for seventy years as part of the answer. Indeed, while Fine Gael has led governments, that has usually occurred despite Fianna Fail's having won a substantial plurality of the seats.

For the Westminster systems you cite, I think it is too early to conclude much from the Scottish or Welsh examples – although, in both cases, there was a decision to change the form of PR remarkably soon after the early elections. New Zealand has been stable; however, it has also been a remarkable example of back-room dealing and the splintering of parties in response to the new electoral laws.

As a final observation, I would note that, in my experience, minority parliaments have meant continuous back-room negotiations on legislation—both content and timing—as well as on other issue like committee work. In the absence of a formal coalition (quite rare), or a formal agreement to support a government under specified conditions (equally rare), there is not much alternative given that our current system would call for the resignation of the government if a major piece of legislation were defeated. The only exceptions that I can think of to this rule are the few cases where a minority government felt nearly

certain of future electoral success and essentially dared the opposition parties to defeat it. (Pearson's government in the period before the 1965 election is often thought to have acted this way.)

**From John Zall**

Must we have a political system that encourages the central role of political parties in the democratic process?

*Answer:*

In theory, the Westminster system does not need parties, although it does need a government to be able to sustain itself through repeated votes, which makes parliamentary coalitions or parties a near-necessity.

In practical terms, there are two compelling arguments for parties.

First, only through parties can the voters feasibly be expected to be able to express their preferences on issues and to be able to hold their elected representatives accountable. While it might be theoretically possible to find out where all candidates stand on all possible issues and to track the winner's performance in Parliament, the practical effort needed to do that is prohibitive. Thus parties become a way to reduce the effort required of voters by aggregating and advocating clusters of issues. Similarly, they can more easily be held accountable for their actions after being elected.

Secondly, I would guess that virtually all democratic, decision-making bodies have seen the development of voting coalitions or alliances of like-minded members. Electoral parties merely recognize this truth and make the choices more explicit for voters.

**From Shoni Field**

You make the point that nominations and elections in FPTP are locally, and not party, driven and seem to imply that this is consistent with the governing system because parties were not originally a part of the Westminster system. However, in most places, the Westminster system has evolved to be heavily party driven (so that nominations and elections may be the only thing that is locally based while post election governance is organized around parties). Do you think it is important that there is consistency in the emphasis or de-emphasis given to parties between the form of election and the governance system? Is the fact that there is an inconsistency between the electoral system (locally driven) and the governance system (party driven) a problem in the current system?

*Answer:*

I think that it is a virtue of our system that there is a tension between local power and central party control. Democratic governance and responsibility to the electorate is very difficult in the absence of parties. On the other hand, having some local autonomy acts to limit the centralization of power within parties that commentators have lamented for over a century.

**From Shoni Field**

Do you think that the way our governance system works should restrict us in the systems we consider? Which ones do you think would be most compatible with our system of governance?

*Answer:*

I think that the way our governance system works should not keep you from considering any system. On the other hand, I think that your recommendations should be the system that works best for BC – not just a system that has pleasing, abstract characteristics, but that is likely to work best in BC by responding to the preferences of British Columbians and providing good government. In pursuing this objective, you should be cognizant of the characteristics of our Westminster system and the impact of a changed electoral system on that system.

Looking at this issue from another angle, I believe that the Assembly, whatever its formal mandate, should make recommendations about our governance system if you think that the system is an impediment to achieving an electoral and government system that would serve British Columbians better.

**From Shoni Field**

You made the point that STV serves local interests well. In your opinion does it serve them too well, resulting in provincial politicians focusing on more local/municipal type (pothole) issues while province wide policy suffers?

*Answer:*

I cannot speak from direct experience; however, I do note that commentators on Ireland and its STV system have noted a real parochialism that is characteristic of its politics. It is also clear that in the STV system a candidate's most serious rivals are likely to be other candidates from the same party. There is some concern that this might undermine any provincial perspective.

**From Anna Rankin**

Do you feel that the electorate would change the way they voted if there were frequent elections due to minority governments? If the public did not like the outcome of the new electoral system, would they not have the power to modify it through their vote? Could this be an advantage to a system that allows voters more choice at the ballot box?

*Answer:*

Looking at the Canadian federal experience, in periods where we have had a number of successive minority governments, I am struck by the similarity in the outcomes of those successive elections. In contrast, when parties have been in for one or two majority terms, we have often seen dramatic changes in their fortunes. It seems that dramatic changes in voting patterns are more likely to result from responses to a government's record than from frustration with successive, short-lived minorities.

If we look at recent examples of changes in electoral systems, we do see a substantial change in the structure of party competition that is made possible by the changed voting system. Specifically, in New Zealand, new parties broke off from the principal parties in the former Parliament. Because small parties were no longer penalized by the FPTP system, some of the uneasy alliance that exists within all large parties broke down and led to the creation of off-shoot parties. While this made forming a government harder, and was partially responsible for the unpopular post-election bargaining, it also clearly increased the range of choices to the voter.

**From Sally de Luna**

Why is it very important to you that the local constituency control the nomination of MLA's?

Do you think Israel system - pure PR list - is good for B.C.?

According to your submission you are not in favor of political parties. You have identified the problems but not the solution to having an efficient electoral system that is favoured by the local constituency.

Answer:

I believe that a well-functioning parliamentary system ought to have a dynamic tension between local autonomy and central authority. If there is too much centralized control, then power will be wielded by unelected party officials, and the fight for power will take place within parties behind closed doors. The Israeli electoral system has created that kind of internally-focused party system and, indeed, it is one characteristic of their politics that frustrates voters.

On the other end of the scale, electoral systems where power is very localized, can lead to parochialism and loss of support for national or provincial initiatives. In his report, Jenkins summarized this view of Irish politics under STV, "But, if anything, the complaint has been ... that TDs [MPs] are too locally and not enough nationally orientated. Members of the same party are often fighting as much or more against each other (in the constituencies) as they are against their opponents."

On the role of parties, I believe that parties are essential to well-functioning democracies. At the same time, I think that Westminster-style parties can become too bureaucratized and fall too much under the control of the current leadership cadre within the party. Given that view, I think that it is important to encourage democratic tendencies within parties. As an example, I believe that our electoral laws might well move further in setting some rules around nomination processes for party candidates in provincial elections (e.g., Should nominators be eligible voters? Should there be a minimum time that memberships have to be held before being eligible to vote in nominations? Should there be legal requirements for the timing and public nature of notices of nominations?).

Finally, I do not think that Israel's pure list PR would be effective in BC. I use it as an example because it is such a pure form of PR and it allows us to see some of the problems in PR as well as some of the advantages.