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ELECTORAL DEMOCRACY IN ALBERTA: TIME FOR REFORM

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In November 2004, Alberta held its 26th general election. Seen one way, the election was a success. By all reports, citizens had relatively easy access to polls. The results were largely uncontroversial. There was no question about which party would form the government and there was a relatively seamless transition from one legislature to another. In a world where many polities have difficulty with these basic democratic processes, it is easy to take these accomplishments for granted.

But there are signs that all is not necessarily well on the electoral front. Once again, a majority government was elected with the support of less than a majority of the province's voters. All of the province's major opposition parties campaigned on a promise to begin a serious examination of Alberta's electoral system. The most significant sign was the choice of a majority of the province's eligible voters not to exercise their right to vote. In fact, the 2004 election saw a record low turnout.

These concerns are not limited to Alberta. Across Canada, provincial governments and citizens are taking a close look at their electoral systems. Some of these provinces are far down the road to reform and are either implementing reforms or holding referenda on reforms later this year. Other provinces have just begun the process. The only Canadian provinces not considering changes to their electoral systems are the three prairie provinces, Nova Scotia and Newfoundland.

This report looks at the case for electoral reform in Alberta. It argues that there is a compelling case to consider electoral reform in the province. Alberta's current electoral system distorts the preferences of the province's voters to a much greater extent than is the case in several provinces considering reform; its weak opposition and low voter turnouts suggest that democracy in the province is less vibrant than would be ideal; in addition, there is considerable public support for electoral innovation. The recommended method for approaching the question of electoral reform is a Citizens' Assembly similar to that recently used in British Columbia and soon to be formed in Ontario.

Electoral Systems in Alberta: Historical Perspective

Although the case can be made that Alberta is lagging behind the other large Canadian provinces in examining its electoral system, historically Alberta was a leader in electoral reform. Alberta is one of only three provinces to use something other than the plurality system to elect MLAs. And Alberta is one of only two provinces that have used a form of proportional representation for elections to the provincial legislature. Electoral innovation is a part of Alberta's political heritage.

In the 1910s, farmers in western Canada became increasingly politicized. Besides general concern about the domination of the Canadian political system by central Canadian commercial interests, the farmers advocated sweeping institutional reforms, such as instruments of direct democracy. Central to their vision for a more democratic political system was electoral reform. Pressured by the farmers, Alberta's Liberal government promised electoral reform, but the entry of the United Farmers of Alberta (UFA) into partisan politics swept the Liberals out of power before they could act.

In their first term of government, the UFA introduced legislation that abolished the plurality electoral system and replaced it with a mixed system. Edmonton and Calgary were both made multi-member districts that elected MLAs using the single transferable vote (STV). The STV system required voters to rank candidates in order of preference. A quota was calculated based on the total number of ballots cast; any candidate earning more votes than the quota was declared elected. Any votes earned by a candidate above the quota needed (surplus) were redistributed according to the second preferences indicated on them. If no candidate had more than the surplus and there were seats left unfilled, the candidate with the fewest votes was eliminated and their votes were distributed according to subsequent preferences. The process of redistributing surplus votes and those of eliminated candidates continued until the requisite number of candidates were elected.

In the rural areas, the UFA implemented an alternative vote (AV) system. The voting process worked the same way as STV, but each district only elected one MLA. To be elected, candidates would have to earn a majority of the vote. If no one earned a majority of the vote on first preferences, the candidate with the fewest votes was eliminated and his or her votes were redistributed according to the subsequent preferences. The decision to use AV in rural areas faced significant criticism. The argument was that AV would preserve the UFA's dominance in rural areas while dividing the UFA's opposition that was primarily concentrated in the cities.

This mixed system remained in place for eight elections, from 1926 to 1955. For the most part, the results under AV did not differ much from what would have been the case under the plurality system. In Edmonton and Calgary, however, STV did make a difference. AS a form of proportional representation, STV ensured that voter preferences in the cities were more accurately reflected in their representation in the provincial legislature. In the face of the overwhelming dominance of the UFA and later Social Credit, STV ensured that there was at least some opposition in the legislature. Edmonton and Calgary also elected MLAs from parties that might not otherwise have earned seats. The implementation of STV was marred, however, by high rates of rejected ballots. Although the complexity of the STV system was undoubtedly partly responsible, much of the blame lay with Alberta's particularly draconian rules for marking ballots.

The Social Credit government abandoned this dual system in 1956. Although they cited the high levels of ballot rejection as the reason for the change, this seemed to be a transparent excuse for a system that was beginning to cost the party seats. In the 1955 election, the opposition Liberals and Cooperative Commonwealth Federation were much

better at supporting each other with their second preferences, resulting in the defeat of several Social Credit candidates. Whatever the reason, Social Credit abolished the STV and AV systems, introducing a Single Member Plurality (SMP) system that has remained in ever since.

Evaluating Alberta's Current Electoral System

Like all other Canadian provinces – at least for the moment – Alberta employs a Single Member Plurality electoral system. The province is divided into 83 electoral districts, each of which elects one MLA to represent it. In order to win, a candidate needs only to win more votes than any other (a plurality, as opposed to a majority). While prevalent in Canada and the United States, SMP electoral systems are rarely used outside North America. Britain, Canada and the United States are the only industrialized democracies that continue to use SMP electoral systems at the national level. Other countries that share Canada's British heritage, notably Australia and New Zealand, have abandoned SMP in favour of other electoral formulae.

Any discussion of the properties of various systems for electing legislatures must be prefaced with a word of caution. Different systems of election *tend* to have certain effects on the party system, stability of government, and behaviour of voters. Political scientists usually divide these effects into mechanical effects, which follow directly from the electoral rules, and psychological effects, which encompass how voters and political parties respond to the incentives created by the system. It must be noted, however, that these are tendencies rather than rules. Electoral systems create incentives for certain kinds of behaviour from voters, candidates and political parties, but the particular context in which the rules exist will alter the ways in which these incentives are interpreted and acted upon. For example, the alternative vote seems to be associated with cooperative behaviour between political parties in some contexts and not others.¹

With this caution in mind, we can enumerate several properties associated with Single Member Plurality electoral systems, and evaluate them in the particular context of Alberta. Any such analysis makes implicit and explicit comparisons to other electoral systems. While there are a wide variety of alternatives, discussed below, the comparison here is to Proportional Representation electoral systems, which, through a variety of formulae, elect legislatures in which the partisan composition is roughly the same as the distribution of the popular vote among parties.

Properties of SMP Electoral Systems:

1. SMP electoral systems tend to produce smaller numbers of parties with seats in the legislature:

¹ Harold J. Jansen, "The Political Consequences of the Alternative Vote: Lessons from Western Canada," *Canadian Journal of Political Science* 37 (2004): 647-669.

In Single Member Plurality electoral systems, the tendency is toward a smaller number of political parties holding seats in the legislature. This tendency is so strong that one political scientist dubbed it a “law,” claiming that SMP electoral systems will produce legislatures in which only two parties hold seats. Of course, the Canadian experience has demonstrated that this law does not hold: we have seen as many as five parties holding significant blocks of seats in the Canadian House of Commons.

Nonetheless, there is a clear, empirically verifiable tendency toward fewer political parties in legislatures elected by SMP electoral system. This is in part due to a mechanical effect: any party that has the support of a relatively small proportion of the electorate – say ten percent – can win seats only if its support is concentrated in one geographic area. This is compounded by two psychological effects. First, knowing that it is difficult for small parties to win seats, political elites are less likely to form new parties.² Second, knowing that small parties have little chance of winning, voters may refrain from ‘wasting’ their vote on a small party.

Alberta’s experience with an SMP electoral system is consistent with the expectation that the legislature will have a relatively small number of parties. In recent legislatures, either two or three parties have elected enough members to gain official party status. In the current legislature, three parties have official party status, and an additional party (the Alberta Alliance) holds one seat.

2. SMP electoral systems tend to over-reward large parties and under-reward smaller parties

Because a plurality electoral rule allows candidates to win seats without winning a majority of the vote, there is a tendency in SMP electoral systems for larger parties to be over-rewarded in terms of seats. It is common, in fact, for parties that win far less than half the popular vote to win a sizeable majority of the seats. In the 2004 Alberta provincial election, for instance, the Progressive Conservatives won almost three-quarters of the seats in the legislature with just under half the vote. The over-representation of the governing party in the legislature comes at the expense of smaller parties: the Liberals won 29 percent of votes, but only 20 percent of seats; the NDP won 10 percent of votes but only 5 percent of seats. With almost as many votes as the NDP, the Alberta Alliance won only 1 percent of the seats.

Table 1: Vote and Seat Share, Alberta Provincial Elections, 1993-2004

Year	Progressive Conservative		Liberal		NDP		Alberta Alliance	
	Vote (%)	Seats (%)	Vote (%)	Seats (%)	Vote (%)	Seats (%)	Vote (%)	Seats (%)
1993	45%	61%	40%	39%	11%	0%		

² André Blais and Louis Massicotte, “Electoral Systems” in Lawrence LeDuc, Richard G. Niemi and Pippa Norris (eds) *Comparing Democracies: Elections and Voting in Global Perspective* (Thousand Oaks: Sage, 1996), 67.

1997	51%	76%	33%	22%	9%	2%		
2001	62%	89%	27%	8%	8%	2%		
2004	47%	73%	29%	20%	10%	5%	9%	1%

As Table 1 demonstrates, the concern in Alberta in recent elections has been less than the governing party has been elected with less than majority support, but rather that the electoral system has exaggerated the size of its majority and left the legislature with a small (and thus ineffective) opposition. This was particularly evident in the 2001 provincial election when just over 60 percent of the popular vote netted almost 90 percent of the seats for the governing PCs. The second largest party, the Liberals, won over a quarter of the popular vote, but only eight percent of seats in the legislature – a weak opposition by any standards.

This phenomenon of over-representing large parties and under-representing small parties is generally referred to by political scientists as ‘disproportionality.’ The greater the exaggeration of winners’ majorities, the greater the disproportionality in the system. Table 2 uses an index of proportionality where a value of 1 indicates that each party’s share of the popular vote perfectly corresponds to each party’s share of the seats in the legislature. In a (theoretical) situation of perfectly disproportional results, where one party receives no votes, but all the seats, the proportionality index would be 0.³

Table 2: Proportionality in selected provincial elections

	Index of Proportionality
BC (2001)	0.63
AB (2004)	0.76
ON (2003)	0.77
QUE (2003)	0.84
NB (2003)	0.90

Table 2 compares the proportionality of the most recent Alberta election to that of recent elections in four other Canadian provinces, all of which have embarked on a reconsideration of their electoral system. The only provincial election that yielded a less proportional outcome than Alberta was British Columbia in 2001. In short, Alberta elections produce results that are as or more disproportional than the results in other provinces that are actively considering electoral reform.

This raises the question of whether disproportionality is a source of concern. The most common objection to disproportional electoral systems is based on perceptions of fairness: by under-representing the losing parties the electoral system appears to be unfairly rewarding the winner at the expense of the loser. A recent public opinion

³ The calculation for the index of proportionality is as follows: $P = 1 - D$. $D = 0.5 * \sum |v_i - s_i|$ where v is vote share and s is seat share. The index is calculated for the four parties in each province that received the largest vote share. See Arend Lijphart, *Electoral Systems and Party Systems: A Study of Twenty-Seven Democracies, 1945-1990* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 60.

survey by the Center for Research and Information on Canada found that almost two-thirds of Albertans surveyed favoured distributing legislative seats proportionally, while just over a quarter opposed the idea.⁴ In a recent study of citizens' attitudes in nineteen European democracies, political scientist André Blais of the Université de Montréal examined how people who supported parties that did not form the government evaluated the fairness and responsiveness of their country's political system. He found that, holding other factors constant, the more disproportional the country's electoral system, the more negative were the citizens' evaluations of both fairness and responsiveness.⁵

3. SMP electoral systems tend to produce stable majority governments

A corollary of the tendency for SMP electoral systems to over-reward the winning party is the production of single-party majority governments. Proponents of SMP electoral systems argue that such governments provide both stability and accountability, the former because single-party majority governments almost never fall, and the latter because an SMP electoral system allows the electorate to replace an old governing party with a new governing party. This stands in contrast to PR systems, where coalitions of parties generally form governments and coalition partners may change after each election.

Recent survey data suggest that Albertans favour single-party majority government: seventy percent of those surveyed supported the idea that strong majority governments were necessary to achieving a well-functioning electoral system. That said, the same survey data indicate that Albertans are not averse to government by coalition: some 72 percent of those surveyed supported the idea of parties forming coalitions when no party had won a majority of seats.⁶

4. SMP electoral systems tend to encourage legislators to devote themselves to constituency service

Another characteristic of the SMP electoral system that most observers agree to be a strength is the provision of constituency service. Because each member of the legislature is the sole representative of a discrete geographic area, that member has a strong incentive to provide extensive service to his or her constituents. Under

⁴ Center for Research and Information on Canada, *Portraits of Canada, 2004*. <http://www.cric.ca>

⁵ André Blais, "How do losers assess electoral democracy?" (Paper presented at the Midwest Political Science Association National Conference, Chicago April 3-6 2003).

⁶ Center for Research and Information on Canada, *Portraits of Canada 2004*. <http://www.cric.ca>. These survey data should be viewed with some caution. The questions asked about political reform did not force respondents to choose among competing values, so many respondents indicated support for mutually exclusive goals, such as distributing legislative seats proportionally and ensuring strong majority governments. Any analysis of Albertans' values regarding electoral reform would require a much more sophisticated survey instrument.

electoral systems where several members represent a constituency, the lines of accountability between elector and elected are less clear and the incentive for the legislator to provide constituency service is commensurately less.

A cross-national study of legislators in Australia, Canada, Ireland, New Zealand and the United Kingdom found that being elected through a single member district electoral system was the most powerful predictor of an MP having a “high” level of constituency focus.⁷

While legislators in SMP systems believe that constituency service is an essential part of their role, it is less clear that the public in these systems shares this view. In his analysis of the Canadian House of Commons, David Docherty found that while experienced legislators ranked helping constituents as their most important function, members of the public ranked this as fifth most important after keeping in touch, protecting the riding, acting as a watchdog over government, and debating in the House of Commons.⁸

5. SMP electoral systems tend to have lower voter turnout

While estimates of the magnitude of the difference vary, there is a clear consensus from studies of voter turnout that SMP electoral systems tend to have lower turnout than proportional representation systems. The estimates of the average difference vary from about 2 percentage points to as high as 12 percentage points.

There are two reasons why we expect to find higher voter turnout in proportional representation electoral systems, both of which fall into the category of ‘psychological effects’ of the electoral system. The first reason relates to the number and the character of parties found in these system. Political scientists have found that in PR systems there tend to be more political parties, covering more of the ideological spectrum, thereby potentially drawing more voters into the system. This broader coverage of the spectrum appears to result in stronger linkages between voters and parties, as voters feel closer bonds of loyalty to their chosen party and are more likely to vote.⁹

The second reason has to do with the perception that votes count for more under PR electoral systems than under SMP. In any election under SMP, only votes for the winner in an electoral district “count” in the sense that they lead to an outcome. If the candidate from party A is elected with 40 percent of the vote in her electoral district, then the 60 percent of voters who cast ballots for parties B and C may feel that their

⁷ Valerie Heitshusen, Garry Young and David M. Wood, “Electoral Context and MP Constituency Focus in Australia, Canada, Ireland, New Zealand and the United Kingdom” *American Journal of Political Science* 49 (2005): 1: 32-45.

⁸ David C. Docherty, *Mr. Smith Goes to Ottawa: Life in the House of Commons* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 1997) 190.

⁹ See David Brockington, “The Paradox of Proportional Representation: The Effect of Party Systems and Coalitions on Individuals’ Electoral Participation” *Political Studies* 2004 52: 469-90; 486.

votes were “wasted.” In electoral districts where the election is unlikely to be competitive, then supporters of the probable losing parties have little incentive to cast a ballot.

There is evidence supporting this proposition from the 2004 Alberta election, which posted a record low turnout of just under 45 percent. In ridings that were close, however, the turnout was somewhat higher. In ridings where the margin between the first-place candidate and the second-place candidate was less than 15 percentage points, the average turnout was 48 percent. In the closest races, where the margin was 5 percentage points or less, the turnout was 49 percent on average.

6. SMP systems can regionalize the party system

One of the major arguments against the SMP system in federal politics is its tendency to exacerbate regional conflict in Canada. The federal Liberal party, for example, tends to win very few seats in Alberta, despite a significant pool of voter support. Conversely, the Reform party and Canadian Alliance parties were seen as “failures” in Ontario despite winning the support of one in five Ontario voters in 1997 and one in four in 2000. This tendency was noted more than thirty-five years ago in a seminal article in Canadian political science and continues to inform searches for alternatives in Canada.¹⁰

Alberta’s party system is not nearly as regionalized as the Canadian federal party system, but it is still easy to see signs that the electoral system does affect perceptions of party support. Table Three reports the votes and seats won by the Liberals and Conservatives in Alberta’s two major cities in the 2004 provincial election. Voters in the city of Edmonton do not support the governing Conservative party in the same numbers as do voters in the rest of the province. The SMP system, however, distorts the situation and makes Conservative support in Edmonton look much lower than it is by rewarding the Conservatives with relatively few seats, certainly fewer than they would seem to deserve by their share of the vote. Conversely, the Liberals’ seat totals make them appear to be much weaker in Calgary than they actually are.

Table Three: Voter support and seats for the Liberals and Conservatives in Edmonton and Calgary (2004)

City	Conservatives		Liberals	
	Votes	Seats	Votes	Seats
Calgary	121720 (51%)	20 (87%)	77473 (33%)	3 (13%)
Edmonton	67876 (32%)	3 (17%)	87136 (41%)	11 (61%)

¹⁰ Alan Cairns, “The Electoral System and the Party System in Canada,” *Canadian Journal of Political Science* 1 (1968): 55-80; Harold J. Jansen and Alan Siaroff, “Regionalism and Party Systems: Evaluating Electoral Reform Proposals,” in Henry Milner, ed., *Steps Toward Making Every Vote Count* (Peterborough: Broadview, 2004), 43-64.

These distortions make it more difficult for the Conservatives to govern and for the Liberals to provide an effective opposition. With few caucus members from Edmonton, it is difficult for the Conservatives to incorporate that city's concerns in their decisions and to allay Edmontonians' perceptions that their city is not fairly treated. The Liberals have a corresponding difficulty in reflecting Calgary's concerns in their positions. The temptation to cater to one region or to ignore another is strong when the electoral system does not reflect the true extent of a party's support in a particular region.

7. SMP inhibits the election of women

Single Member electoral systems tend not to produce legislatures with large numbers of female members. The logic of a single-member system, in which each party can nominate only one candidate in each electoral district, appears to favour the selection of 'typical' candidates: generally, men from majority ethnic groups. Certainly, Alberta's single member system has not resulted in anything approaching equitable representation for women. After the 2004 provincial election, only 16 percent of the province's MLAs were women. The proportion of women in the province's legislature has declined after each of the two most recent provincial elections.

Cross-national studies demonstrate that PR electoral systems tend to produce legislatures with more equitable representation of women. In mixed systems, which elect members both from geographic constituencies and party lists, women tend to be better represented among the latter group.

The Case for Reform

For several decades, Albertans have lived with many of the effects of and problems with the single member plurality system identified above. It is apparent, however, that addressing these concerns is an emerging priority in Alberta. Although Alberta's electoral institutions are successful in the sense that they have not been marred by serious controversies over process, there are some warning signs that the electoral process needs to be addressed.

The chief concern must be the low level of voter turnout. In the 2004 provincial election, only 45% of Albertans registered to vote bothered to cast a ballot. This was a record low in a province that has always had already low levels of voter turnout. The causes of declining voter turnout are myriad and complex; many of them are due to changes in social patterns and beliefs that are not easily addressed by public policy. The electoral system, however, is one contributing factor that can and should be addressed. A different electoral system is likely to help to address the lack of choice and impact that Albertans apparently feel at the ballot box.

There is a growing sense among Albertans that something needs to be done with the electoral system. It is notoriously difficult to do good survey research on electoral reform due to the complexities of the issues and the trade-offs involved. The research that does exist suggests that Albertans want action on the electoral system. As noted above, two-thirds of the Albertans surveyed by the Center for Research and Information on Canada favoured an electoral system that ensured proportionality. The fact that a majority of Albertans supports action on the electoral system, even in the absence of a strong movement in favour of electoral reform or a process to address it, suggests that it is time to begin a serious dialogue about Alberta's options.

Finally, it must be noted that this issue has support from across the political spectrum. In keeping with the electoral reform debate across Canada, Albertans from a variety of political affiliations are seeing the need for electoral reform. In the 2004 election, the platforms of the Alberta Alliance, the Liberals, the New Democratic Party, and the Green Party all supported forming a citizens' assembly to examine electoral reform. It is likely that this is the only issue that these four parties could agree on. Electoral reform is not a right-left issue, but a question of how to reinvigorate and strengthen Alberta's democracy.

Historically, Alberta has been at the forefront of electoral innovation in Canada. It is worrisome, then, that the province is lagging behind Quebec, Ontario, BC, PEI and New Brunswick, all of which are currently engaged in a reexamination of their provincial electoral institutions.

The Road to Reform

If we accept that there is a compelling case to take a careful look at the need for electoral reform in Alberta, we are then faced with the question of how to go about undertaking this examination and considering alternative electoral systems. The recent experience of four Canadian provinces offers three potential routes, each with their own merits and drawbacks.

Government-Led Reform

Quebec was one of the first provinces to consider reforming its electoral system. The Liberal government opted to develop a proposal for electoral reform within government, with the Ministry for the Reform of Democratic Institutions taking the lead. The original proposal developed within the Ministry was rumored to be a Mixed Member Proportional electoral system very similar to the one employed in Germany. Such a system would have elected a substantial proportion of MNAs from lists, while maintaining local representation through MNAs elected from enlarged geographic constituencies. Reports from Quebec suggest that this reform met with considerable opposition in the Cabinet and the Liberal caucus.

The resulting proposal is a much more modest variation of an MMP electoral system. It proposes that 60 percent of MNAs be elected from geographic constituencies and the other 40 percent from lists. The lists would be elected from districts comprised of three geographic constituencies, and each district would elect two members. This stands in contrast to the experience in most MMP systems in which districts are large enough to elect five or more members from a list. The practical consequence of such small lists will be that smaller parties have little chance to elect MNAs and that election outcomes will be less proportional than they would be in a system with larger districts.

The Quebec experience points to the limitation of leaving consideration of the electoral system in the hands of the government. Governing parties under SMP electoral systems are almost always the beneficiaries of the status quo. Their majority was produced or inflated by the existing electoral system and their caucus is usually inclined toward the system that elected them. Government-led reforms are likely to be predisposed toward the status quo or to a limited reform of the status quo in order to protect entrenched interests. This criticism should not be taken to mean that any process that recommends the status quo is necessarily flawed; rather, it is a criticism of protection of the status quo by the actors who have most recently benefited from it.

Independent Commissions

In both New Brunswick and PEI, the provincial governments have appointed independent commissions to consider electoral reform. In the case of PEI, the commission consisted of a judge and a small research staff. The recommendation of the PEI Electoral Reform Commission was that the province should adopt an MMP electoral system with two-thirds of members elected from geographic constituencies and one-third from lists based on the popular vote received by their party. The PEI government has committed to holding a plebiscite on electoral reform in November of 2005.

In New Brunswick, the Premier appointed an 8-member Commission on Legislative Democracy to consider electoral reform, along with a host of other issues, and report to him on its findings. The Commission presented its report in January of 2005, recommending that New Brunswick adopt a mixed-member proportional electoral system with 36 MLAs elected in single member districts as they are now and 20 elected in four multi-member districts. The twenty MLAs would be allocated in such a way as to partially correct for the distortions of the SMP system.

The commission format is certainly one that has a long history in Canada, both federally and provincially. A properly functioning commission enjoys a degree of independence from the political process that allows it to offer solutions that are less tainted by partisan self-interest. The relatively small number of people involved in a commission allows for the members to become well-informed about the various options and their effects. It provides relatively streamlined deliberations. The major problem with commissions is the implementation process. The libraries of Canadian governments are full of recommendations by well-meaning commissions that have done nothing but gather dust in the meantime. Governments are under no requirement to act on or even respond to

commission recommendations. In the New Brunswick case, it is not clear what status the commission's recommendations have or how Premier Bernard Lord and his government will respond, if at all.

Citizens' Assemblies

The provincial governments of both British Columbia and Ontario have established Citizens' Assemblies to consider the electoral system. The Ontario Assembly has been announced, but not yet formed, while the BC Assembly has completed its mandate and reported back to the BC electorate, a process that will culminate in a referendum in May 2005 on a question set out by the Assembly.

The BC Citizens' Assembly was comprised of 160 citizens of the province selected at random from lists of eligible voters in each provincial electoral district. The selection process was crafted to ensure that the Assembly would be representative of the population of the province in terms of age and gender. After they had been selected, members of the Assembly were immersed in a three-month learning phase that consisted of six weekend sessions led by academics from British Columbia and selected international experts. The learning phase of the Assembly's work culminated in development of a statement of shared values for the Assembly's work, including respecting people and their opinions, listening to understand, focusing on the mandate, and respecting the views of all members of the Assembly. After the learning phase, the Assembly held a series of fifty public hearings across the province, each of which was attended by several Assembly members. Summaries of all presentations were made available to assembly members, as were the texts of over 1500 written submissions from British Columbians.

The final phase of the Assembly process was the deliberation phase. This phase began with Assembly members framing the democratic values that would guide their deliberations: fair (proportional) electoral results, effective local representation and greater voter choice. The Assembly then went on to build two detailed models of electoral systems that would meet these criteria. The first was a Single Transferable Vote (STV) system and the other an MMP system. Given a choice between the two, an overwhelming majority of Assembly members opted for STV over MMP. Then, given a choice between STV and the status quo, an even larger majority of Assembly members (146 versus 7) opted for recommending a referendum on STV.

The Assembly's recommendation is one that is unlikely to have been generated by a commission comprised of either experts in the field or representatives of political parties. It is a system that gives voters considerable flexibility in how they allocate their vote, may weaken political parties' ability to maintain tight party discipline in the legislature, and continues the practice of voters casting a ballot for individuals, rather than political parties. In short, it is the kind of electoral system much more likely to be recommended by a group of citizens skeptical of the merits of political parties and strict party discipline. While many observers have criticized the recommendation of the BC Assembly on the grounds that it will be difficult to mobilize support for this fairly unusual electoral

system, the fact remains that it was the overwhelming choice of citizens, once they had defined their preferences and learned about the alternatives available.

The Citizens' Assembly approach offers three benefits over the other alternatives: First, it takes the decision out of the hands of elected officials and partisan activists who have a stake in shaping a system that will benefit their party. Second, it offers the most extensive and informed citizen engagement imaginable. If we understand electoral systems to be important because they connect the electorate with government, then it is imperative that the system selected reflects the values of the citizenry, once they have had the opportunity to inform themselves about the available alternatives. Finally, the outcome of a Citizens' Assembly has a moral and democratic weight that cannot be equaled by any commission, no matter how widely it consults. It is difficult for government to ignore recommendations of a broadly-based and democratic assembly.

Among the drawbacks of the Citizens' Assembly approach is that it is a lengthy and cumbersome process. It takes time and significant resources to select the participants, provide them with the necessary information and background, and establish a process by which they can choose meaningfully from the electoral options before them. That said, this might be a necessary trade-off in ensuring broad citizen engagement with the issues and the legitimacy that comes from an Assembly approach. Another problem is that a Citizens' Assembly may not engage stakeholders adequately and opt for a system that does not enjoy support among established electoral interests. Given that the Assembly's choice would probably need to be subject to some kind of ratification by (at a minimum) the legislature or by the public at large through a referendum, a system adopted by an Assembly might face a determined and well-organized opposition. The British Columbia example will likely be instructive in this respect.

Conclusion

There is a compelling case for the government of Alberta to initiate a process evaluating the province's existing electoral arrangements. Low voter turnout is a symptom of a broader democratic malaise and is, at least in part, a by-product of the province's current electoral system. There is considerable public support for electoral reform in Alberta, driven in part by the reform processes underway in five other provinces. Most compelling, however, is the evidence that Alberta's single member plurality electoral system distorts Albertans' political preferences to a greater extent than is the case in most other provinces considering reform.

Formation of a Citizens' Assembly randomly selected from the province's population is the preferred route for evaluating and possibly reforming the province's electoral system. An Assembly takes the reform decision out of the hands of the partisan political elite, it provides a mechanism for meaningful citizen engagement, and its decision will have a compelling moral and democratic weight.

Alberta was once at the forefront of electoral democracy in Canada. Recent developments in other provinces have left it lagging behind. It is time for Alberta to catch up with the

other provinces and begin a serious debate over how we elect our provincial governments.