



Parliamentary Book Shelf

Real Power to the People: A Novel Approach to Electoral Reform in British Columbia by R. B. Herath, University Press of America, Lanham Maryland, 2007

This book adds to the growing literature on the British Columbia Citizens' Assembly on Electoral Reform. The recommendation of the Assembly favouring adoption of the Single Transferable Vote system was narrowly defeated when it failed to reach the 60% threshold for success imposed by the government.

Much of the book is devoted to the background and setting up the assembly, the random selection process, the learning phase, the public hearing phase, and the deliberation phase all of which are readily available in other publications and on the website of the assembly. The detailed discussion of arguments for and against proportional representation and the advantages and disadvantages of the various systems are also well known.

What makes this book unique is that the author was a member of the Citizens' Assembly. He is even more unique in that he is one of only two Assembly members who had been active in politics having led a political party in his native country, Sri Lanka. He is also a poet, a dramatist and holds a Ph.D in organizational behaviour. He admits he was an outspoken proponent of the Multi Member Proportional system but for the most part does not allow his personal preference to colour his analysis.

Not surprisingly the author is a great supporter of the Citizens' Assembly process but in the last two chapters he identifies several shortcomings with the process as it was used in BC. These have all been noted by others but his perspective as a former member of the Assembly, is particularly useful.

These problems can be described as follows:

- Mandate restrictions: The Assembly was prevented from recommending a larger size for the legislature or making any changes other than the way members are elected. The Assembly was also forced to recommend only one alternative to the status quo.
- External Influences: He thought there was an over dependence on external academic experts and an unwillingness to listen to individuals with experience in practical politics.
- Insufficient attention to public opinion. During the consultations phase the vast majority of individuals and groups who made representations to the Assembly favoured MMP but they were often dismissed as interest groups who would benefit from the system they were proposing.
- Incomplete analysis of the options: During the deliberation phase the MMP model was not developed or considered to the same extent as the STV model, mainly due to time restrictions.
- Combining the referendum with the general election: This may have saved money but it meant the electoral debate was overshadowed by the election. It also encouraged politicians to avoid taking a position which might alienate one group or the other.

- Inadequate public funding: No money was allocated for informing the electorate about recommendations of the CA before the referendum

Despite these problems the author hopes that other jurisdictions use Citizens' Assemblies to consider electoral and indeed other difficult policy matters that elected politicians are loath to tackle.

The author does not consider one rather dubious aspect of the Citizens' Assembly process that was present from the very outset. This was the idea that the choice of an electoral system is a question of "values". Of course different electoral systems that have different characteristics but these are not values in any meaningful sense of that term.

We would be much better advised to think of an electoral system as simply the plumbing, not the heart and soul, of our democracy. Given the right conventions, the right institutions, and a proper sense of honesty and probity there are half a dozen electoral systems that are perfectly satisfactory. An obsession with values undermines one of the real virtues of democratic politics, an openness to compromise.

It should not take a Citizens' Assembly, a referendum and years of debate to decide the kind of plumbing we need in our house. What we need is political leadership that would make use of existing Citizens' Assemblies, commonly known as parliament and legislatures, to deal with the issue of electoral reform.

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