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BC's Growing Gap

By Iglika Ivanova

Many recent research papers and media reports have exposed the shameful levels of poverty and homelessness in our wealthy province, raising legitimate concerns that the situation of the poor could worsen even further during the recession.

Our new study, *BC's Growing Gap: Family Income Inequality 1976–2006*, reveals that it is not just the poorest families in BC who are worse off than ever before, but that the middle class is losing ground as well, and much more so than in the rest of Canada.

We use custom data from Statistics Canada to track earnings and after-tax income of BC families with children over the past 30 years—about a generation. These families make up nearly half of BC's population, they tend to have more stable and less polarized incomes than unattached individuals and their economic fortunes can serve as an indicator of the opportunities available for children in our province.

We find that income inequality among BC families has grown dramatically over the past 30 years, with income increasingly concentrated among the richest families. While the bottom half of families earned over one quarter (29 per cent) of total earnings in 1976, their share dropped to less than one fifth (19 per cent) by 2006. Gains for the upper half of earners went almost entirely to the top 10 per cent, whose share of total earnings increased from 22 to 29 per cent.

In other words, the gap between the wealthiest and the majority of BC families has widened to the point that the top 10 per cent of families now earn considerably more than the entire bottom half of families combined.



PHOTO: JOSHUA BERSON

Another way to measure changes in income inequality over time is to track the ratio of the average after-tax incomes in the top and bottom 10 per cent of the income distribution. This income gap in BC reached its highest levels in the early 2000s, when the after-tax incomes of the top 10 per cent of families with children were over 11 times higher, on average, than those of the poorest 10 per cent of families, compared to only 8.5 times on average between 1976 and 1990.

BC has ranked among the top three most unequal provinces in 26 out of 31 years for which data is available and our province is becoming increasingly more unequal in the new millennium—we had the highest income gap in 2001, 2002, 2003 and 2005 and the second highest in 2004 and 2006 (second to Ontario and Saskatchewan respectively).

Not only is the economic pie more unevenly distributed now than it was 30 years ago, but the majority of BC families with children have fallen behind in absolute terms as well. We find that fully 60 per cent of families with children are earning less than their counterparts in the late 1970s.

Families in the lower tiers of the income spectrum saw larger declines in their earnings than those higher up. Earnings fell by 74 per cent for families in the bottom 10 per cent of the distribution to an

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Vanilla, No Sprinkles: A Review of BC Budget 2009

By Marc Lee

Faced with a nasty recession at its doorstep, the 2009 BC budget is uninspiring and underwhelming in its ambition. There are no tax cuts or drastic spending cuts, thankfully (although some smaller ministries are looking at some significant cuts), but nor is there any short-term assistance to the most vulnerable, nor any meaningful investments towards a long-term strategic vision.



Overall, the budget has extremely little in support of public transit, social housing, or residential care, all areas that the market left behind during the boom.

In all likelihood, the economic picture in BC is worse than what is painted in the budget. While premised on a 0.9 per cent drop in real GDP in 2009, the budget assumes a rebound arriving in 2010. Given the state of housing starts, commodity prices and the state of export markets, there is good reason to be more pessimistic.

The budget's optimism is reflected in the projections for unemployment, which is assumed to average 6.2 per cent for 2009. But unemployment recently surged to 6.7 per cent in February, and is more than two full percentage points higher than at the start of 2008. The ranks of the unemployed in February were up 60 per cent compared to a year earlier.

The government's economic forecasts translate into a \$495 million deficit in 2009/10 and \$245 million in 2010/11, before rebalancing in 2011/12. These deficits are relatively small compared to the total budget: the 2009/10 deficit amounts to only 1.3 per cent of total revenues. For a government so committed to fiscal conservatism, this is a small bridge to cross, so one wonders why they bothered convening the Legislature early to amend in embarrassing fashion their own balanced budget legislation.

Perhaps because those deficits may be much larger before this is all over. Spending pressures for social assistance will be higher than currently forecast (see below). On the revenue side, the budget projects an increase in some tax revenues predicated on growing personal income of 1.7 per cent and growing consumer expenditures of 1.9 per cent in 2009. This seems unlikely, and so we could easily see considerably larger deficits in the next two years, and no balanced budget in 2011/12. Moreover, there are no forecast allowances in this year's budget leaving little room for a worse-than-expected economy.

In terms of economic stimulus, there is almost none in the budget. A half-billion-dollar deficit is a mere quarter of one per cent of BC's \$200 billion GDP. The looming deficits can be attributed to falling revenues arising from the recession, whereas a stimulus would include additional spending measures (or tax cuts) above and beyond that cyclical deficit.

Instead, and as anticipated, any stimulus is in the capital budget, up \$1 billion in 2009/10 from 2008/09—or half of one per cent of GDP in new stimulus. This is because capital expenditures get amortized in the operating budget over several decades (the lifetime of the asset in question), an accounting convention that creates an incentive to “hide” spending measures outside the operating budget. The consequence is that we are biased towards bricks and mortar at the expense of funds to provide the services therein.

Getting details on all of this new capital spending is difficult as there is no list of projects. The province will match the anticipated federal contribution to infrastructure of \$1 billion from last month's federal budget for a total of \$2 billion in infrastructure, over three years. These numbers are much lower than the \$14 billion touted by the government, as most of the budget is re-announcing old money, not new money. Overall, the budget has extremely little in support of public transit, social housing, or residential care, all areas that the market left behind during the boom.

Program expenditures are squeezed in the budget, with cuts to many core ministries. A big gap is \$1.9 billion of “administrative and other cost savings” over three years that reallocated to other priorities.

From the Editor

Welcome to our pre-election edition of *BC Commentary*. In this issue, we take a closer look at our democracy itself, with a number of articles about the other vote on May 12, the referendum on the Single Transferable Vote, aka STV, a system of proportional representation. You may remember STV from the 2005 election, where STV captured a majority of votes—a larger share of the popular vote than the Liberals won in their 2001 landslide—but not the 60 per cent threshold required for victory. It was a narrow enough margin that the BC government decided to put it back to the people one more time.

Alas, with an economic crisis on our hands, few people are talking about STV in the lead-up to the vote. That is a shame, because whether you end up voting for or against STV, the referendum provides us an opportunity to take a step back and look at what we like, and do not like, about our electoral system.

In the spirit of democracy, our special edition breaks from our usual publishing pattern, and includes a number of articles written by CCPA members who have taken an interest in the issue of democratic reform, including one who served on the 2004 Citizens' Assembly on Electoral Reform that recommended STV. We have also included a simple primer on the STV process, and since CCPA has no organizational position on STV, we have both the yes and no sides represented. We hope you find these articles about STV stimulating and informative.

This issue also reviews the recent BC Budget, and summarizes an extensive review of inequality trends in BC going back three decades. Its key finding, that BC is becoming a more unequal place, has profound implications for democracy itself, especially if the richest among us can have a greater say in both the marketplace and at the cabinet table.

Marc Lee
Editor

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BC Budget 2009*

This “belt-tightening” part of the budget is poorly explained. For example, \$589 million in savings are identified in 2009/10, but information is only provided that accounts for \$297 million, leaving the remaining \$292 million unaccounted for, as well as any information about savings in future years. On top of that there are additional “efficiencies” yet to be found of \$125 million in 2010/11 and \$250 million in 2011/12. Given that the government already went through a “core review” in its first mandate, that should sound alarm bells.

Health care fares the best of any sector in the budget, with an increase of 5.7 per cent in each of the next two years. Little of this is new money, however—only \$25 million is added to the numbers tabled in last year's budget.

K–12 funding has been cut relative to the allocation from last year's budget, a striking development given recent concerns about budget shortfalls for school districts. Overall, K–12 funding increased by 1.5 per cent in 2009/10 and 0.7 per cent in 2010/11, amounts that are not sufficient to keep up with cost pressures and will thus lead to further budget cuts down the road.

The difference seems to have been handed over to the post-secondary sector.

The budget does a poor job of estimating for cost pressures in social assistance, as a recession would automatically lead to higher expenditures. The budget notes that every 1 per cent increase in the temporary assistance caseload increases expenditures by \$3.5 million. In January, the social assistance caseload soared by 36.5 per cent compared to a year earlier, whereas the budget planned for only a small rise in temporary assistance caseload of 6 per cent, and for the total caseload, 4.6 per cent. Annualized, this translates into an increase of \$128 million, and caseloads are likely to continue to rise during 2009. It would not be unrealistic to project that this could translate into cost pressures in the hundreds of millions of dollars. And that is without any reforms to a punitive regime that makes it much harder to access a very meager level of benefits.

On the climate front, the Ministry of Environment received a budget cut, even though it now has new

In January, the social assistance caseload soared by 36.5 per cent compared to a year earlier. Annualized, this translates into an increase of \$128 million, and caseloads are likely to continue to rise during 2009.

Our findings point to a disturbing growth of inequality in this province and help explain why even during the height of our recent economic boom, many people have found it hard to get ahead.

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BC's Growing Gap*

average of only \$1,336, compared to \$5,140 in the late 1970s. The second, third and fourth decile saw their earnings drop by a staggering 57, 42 and 29 per cent respectively, despite working more than their counterparts a generation ago. Even the seventh decile—earning an average of \$78,000 in the late 1970s—did not see an increase over the 30-year period.

Only the top 30 per cent of families earned more than their counterparts in the late 1970s and the gains were higher for those who were better off to begin with. The top 10 per cent benefited the most as their average earnings rose by 29 per cent from \$152,374 to \$196,457 between the late 1970s and the mid-2000s.

BC's tax-and-transfer system has helped to make up for some of the earnings losses for the poorest 10 per cent of families, but it hasn't done much for the rest of the bottom half of families whose after-tax incomes declined considerably.

The figure shows that declines in real after-tax incomes are substantially larger in BC than in Canada as a whole, indicating that other provinces have done a better job of addressing inequality in the labour market using taxes and government transfers.

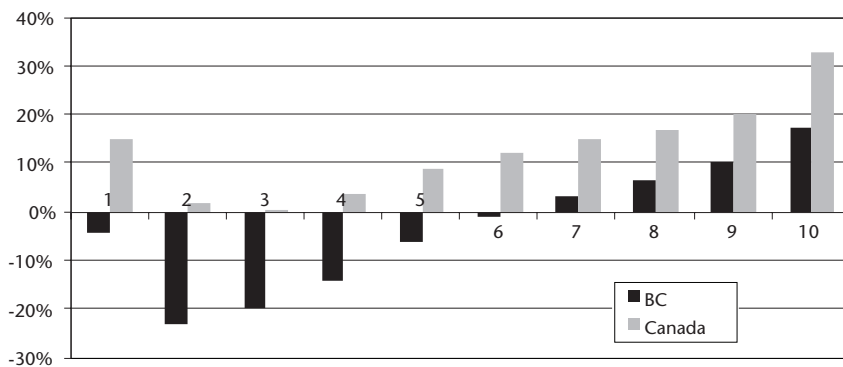
Our findings point to a disturbing growth of inequality in this province and help explain why even during the height of our recent economic boom, many people have found it hard to get ahead. Our economy almost doubled over the last 30 years, but economic growth alone does not automatically translate into higher incomes for most people, especially for those at the lower end of the scale.

The BC government can, and should, take action to reduce income inequality and help poor and middle class British Columbians weather the recession. Our report outlines a range of policy options available, including making the tax and transfer system fairer, expanding public services and social programs for all citizens, implementing a comprehensive poverty-reduction plan and improving earnings and working-conditions conditions for low-wage workers.

In the end, it is up to all of us to decide what type of society we want to live in: a society that is growing more unequal by the year, or a more inclusive one, where the benefits of prosperity are broadly shared.

Iglika Ivanova is the CCPA-BC's Public Interest Researcher. Her recent report, BC's Growing Gap: Family Income Inequality 1976-2006, is available at www.policyalternatives.ca.

Percentage change in average after-tax incomes by decile, families with children, 1976-79 compared to 2003-06



Source: Author's calculations based on data from Statistics Canada.

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BC Budget 2009*

responsibilities for the Climate Action Secretariat. If the government's green agenda was sincere we should have seen an increase in the MOE budget, and this neglect suggests that BC's legislated GHG reduction targets are about as safe as the government's balanced budget legislation.

BC's carbon tax implementation will continue as previously planned. This will amount to another penny per litre at the pump come July. However,

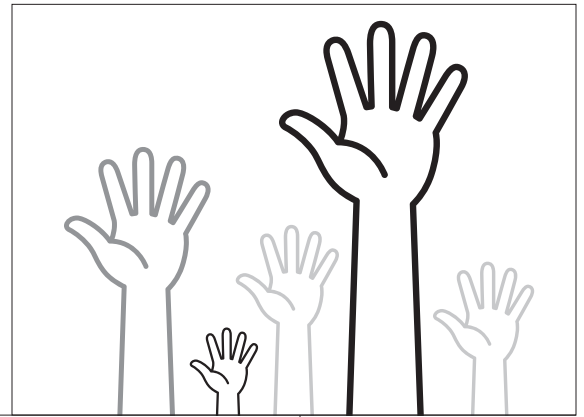
the low-income credit has not been changed either. It is scheduled to increase by only 5 per cent in July 2009, compared to an increase in the carbon tax of 50 per cent. The budget only commits to increase the credit by 10 per cent as of July 2011. The sum total of these moves is that the carbon tax becomes regressive in 2009/10 and thereafter.

Marc Lee is a Senior Economist with the CCPA-BC and Editor of BC Commentary.

An STV Primer

By Ross Johnson

Single Transferable Vote, or STV, is a preferential voting system intended to reflect in the number of seats won by each party elected the overall proportion of votes received. It differs from other proportional systems in that it minimizes wasted votes and allows voters to cast votes for different parties. Voters are able to vote for their favoured candidates regardless of party affiliation.



A BC STV system would have 20 multi-member ridings with between two and seven elected members per riding. More populated urban ridings would have more elected members, while rural areas would have fewer members because they have smaller populations. To allow the sparsely populated northern areas of the province to have anywhere near manageable-sized ridings the number of seats in the Legislature has been increased to 85.

To see how this works let's take a five member riding as an example: A political party could run anywhere from zero to five candidates. All party candidates have an equal chance of being elected since the political party who nominated them does not enter them on a list in preferential order (as happens under some other forms of proportional voting systems). Independent candidates may also run.

Voting is straightforward: voters rank candidates in preferential order, e.g. 1, 2, 3, etc. The counting for STV is more complicated, and will be done by computer, with a paper back-up. The first requirement is to determine how many votes are needed to win one of the seats. This "Droop Quota" is determined based on the following formula:

$$\text{Quota} = \frac{\text{Number of valid ballots cast}}{\text{Number of MLAs in riding} + 1} + 1$$

For example, if 1,000 valid ballots were cast, and five seats were up for grabs, then the Quota would be 1,000 divided by (5 + 1) = 6, which equals 166.6. Adding one, this yields a rounded 168 votes needed to win a seat.

We begin by counting first preferences on all ballots. If no candidate has reached the quota of 168 votes then the candidate with the fewest number of votes is eliminated and the second place

choices from those ballots are distributed to the named candidates.

Let us assume that Candidate A now has received 200 votes, and is thus elected with 32 more votes than necessary. These 32 surplus votes are then redistributed to other candidates in proportion to Candidate A's total votes. Because a portion of each vote has already been used to elect a candidate, only the "unused portion" is transferred, based on a formula to ensure a fair redistribution. For example:

$$\text{Transfer value} = \frac{\text{Candidate's surplus votes}}{\text{Candidate's total votes}} = \frac{32}{200} = 0.16$$

In this manner the count continues. The surpluses of each elected candidate are redistributed at the appropriate transfer value. When there are no surpluses from elected candidates to distribute, the candidate with the least number of votes is dropped and those votes are distributed at full value. This process continues until all seats are filled.

For a by-election the preferential ballot remains, but the election will probably be for one seat in a particular riding and therefore the quota would simply be 50 per cent +1 for election. If more than one seat is to be filled, the ballot will be handled as in a regular STV election.

Putting aside the math, the outcome of this process is that STV will produce a Legislative Assembly that reflects the popular vote.

If there are three or more parties running, STV will often not produce a majority government immediately. This means that the leadership of the party with the greatest number of seats will have

Putting aside the math, the outcome of this process is that STV will produce a Legislative Assembly that reflects the popular vote.

The Case for STV

By David Huntley and Michael Wortis

BC-STV has many advantages over the current First-Past-the-Post system (FPTP) used for electing our MLAs. BC-STV will achieve a reasonably proportional representation of parties, with the number of MLAs of each party in close proportion to its fraction of the popular vote.



Single-party majority governments will become less frequent, and MLAs will have to work together, either in minority governments or, more likely, in coalition governments.

Voters will be able to vote for their preferred candidates without fear of wasting their votes, and they will be able to rank the candidates offered by their preferred party, thus determining which are elected. As well, BC-STV will reduce the imbalance of power between voters and parties. It achieves all this while preserving local representation.

Because BC-STV is a proportional system, the make-up of the legislature will reflect the party preferences of the voters. These party preferences will change from one election to the next; but, since they cannot be distorted as they are under FPTP, there is a lower probability of large policy swings from one election to the next. This seems likely to lead to increased political stability and a greater tendency towards consensus legislation.

Legislatures in which one party has more than half the seats will occur when a majority of voters cast their ballots for a particular party, but this happens rarely in BC. Thus, single-party majority governments will become less frequent, and MLAs will have to work together, either in minority governments or, more likely, in coalition governments. The history of proportional and FPTP systems shows that both can lead to stable governments and both can lead to unstable ones.

Minority governments are usually unable to pass legislation that the majority of the people do not want and are likely to find common ground through compromise and accommodation. Minority governments in Canada have been responsible for some of our most progressive legislation, most notably Medicare and the Canada Pension Plan.

Coalition governments are ones in which two or more parties have a formal working relationship in order to form a majority. Nearly all European countries have coalition governments because they use some form of proportional representation

for their elections. It is no coincidence that these countries have the most equitable societies.

Larger ridings under BC-STV will mean that there will be more names (~12–18) on the ballot, so the conscientious voter will need to learn the views of more candidates than at present. It is this feature which allows voters to decide which of the candidates from each party are elected, thus shifting party policy and removing deadwood.

Some people express concern that the larger ridings will mean a dilution of local representation, especially in sparsely populated rural ridings. This is not true. There will be the same number of MLAs and the average distance for a voter to his or her nearest MLA will be the same as at present. Nearly all ridings will have MLAs from two or more different parties, thus giving the voter a choice of MLAs to go to for assistance.

With BC-STV, voters with a strong preference for an independent candidate or one from a smaller party can mark their 1st preferences to such candidates without fear of “wasting” their ballots. If such candidates receive relatively few votes, these votes are transferred to the voters’ 2nd and possibly 3rd preferences, etc., during the counting process. If a candidate receives more votes than are needed for election, each of these votes is split into two portions; one portion, which is enough to elect that candidate, stays with that candidate, and the remainder is transferred to the next listed preference on that ballot, thus using the full value of that ballot. The result is that far more ballots count towards the election of a candidate than under FPTP.

After the election, each voter will be able to see which candidate or candidates his or her vote helped to elect. Under FPTP, it is usually the case

The Case Against STV

By David Schreck

Inequality is inherent in BC-STV. The Northeast (Peace River) would get two MLAs while the Capital Region would get seven. Some voters would see their vote dead-ended, not electing anyone and not transferred, while others would see their vote help elect more than one MLA. What's fair about that?



No one should vote for STV unless they can understand how votes are counted. Supporters of BC-STV say that it doesn't matter if people don't understand how votes are counted. They argue that most people don't know how their car works but they can still drive it. That analogy is misleading. In deciding whether to buy a GM or a Toyota vehicle, prospective purchasers need to know a lot more than just how to drive each car, such as whether the company will be in business next year and whether the warranty will be any good.

In deciding between voting systems, British Columbians need to know a lot more than just how to vote. They also need to know how votes are counted in order to be able to adequately compare FPTP and BC-STV. BC voters are not test driving BC-STV; we could be living with it for decades.

The first word in STV is "single." That is exactly what it is, a single vote, even though a constituency will elect from two to seven MLAs. With BC-STV the minimum number of votes required to win, the "Droop quota," varies depending on the number of MLAs to be elected. In percentage terms the quota is equal to 12.5 per cent of the total votes cast in a seven-MLA constituency, rising to 33.3 per cent of the total votes cast in a two-MLA constituency. Those percentages are important because any votes in excess of the quota get redistributed to other candidates based on the instructions each voter gave by way of candidate rankings.

It can take a dozen rounds of adjusting votes before the count is finished. The last candidate to be elected usually has fewer votes than the quota, because there remains one position to fill and no further votes to transfer. The remaining candidate with the most votes in the final round is declared elected. That means that in a seven-MLA constituency, the seventh candidate to be declared elected wins with less than 12.5 per cent of the total vote.

For a real-life example, look at the actual count in the May 24, 2007 Republic of Ireland election for the district of Dublin North, which had four representatives to elect and 13 candidates. The vote count took ten rounds of redistributing votes, but the 5,256 people who voted for Brendan Ryan (who lost) did not have their second preferences transferred. You can pick any other real life example of STV and you'll see that there are always some voters whose vote doesn't get transferred and whose first preference doesn't win.

Anyone who has ever had more than one boss at the same time for the same job knows that accountability can go out the window. With BC's existing system of single MLA constituencies, accountability is clear. If you don't like what your MLA did, or what your MLA's party did, vote for a different candidate. With five MLAs representing one enormous constituency, each could say a problem is someone else's responsibility or fault.

From an MLA's point of view, large multiple member regions would make it impossible to service all the school boards, municipal councils and community organizations that would be in regions two to seven times larger than our existing constituencies. Supporters say that candidates would carve out their own constituencies within the large regions, which, if true, is another way of saying they would ignore large numbers of voters in the region since they would know that they could get elected, not with the most support, but with a minimum support of 12.5 per cent to 33.3 per cent.

Many of the assertions made by proponents of BC-STV cannot be verified, including the claim that STV is more likely to produce coalition governments because it is more likely to elect MLAs from more than two parties. Actual experience with STV, apart from municipal elections, is

You can pick any other real life example of STV and you'll see that there are always some voters whose vote doesn't get transferred and whose first preference doesn't win.

Reflections on the Citizens' Assembly

By Wendy Bergerud

Have you ever had your name pulled out of a hat? I did! And it gave me a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity: to be one of the 160 members of BC's Citizens' Assembly on Electoral Reform. In 2003, one man and one woman were randomly selected from the lists of voters in each of BC's 79 ridings to form this assembly, along with two members from the aboriginal community. This innovative process created a group of people that closely mirrored the population of BC.



PHOTO: KENT KALBERG

An important issue for us was rural representation. It got a lot of "air time" during our plenary sessions. How could we design a system that was fair to all, regardless of where we lived?

The Assembly worked throughout 2004 to learn about voting systems, consult with our fellow citizens, and decide if we thought a change would be appropriate and, if so, what that change should be. Like most assembly members I knew very little about voting systems when I started. I did know that I wasn't happy with how negative our politics had become.

I was puzzled how a party could form government with less of the popular vote than the other party got, as happened in 1996. Or how, in 2001, a popular vote of almost 58 per cent gave the former opposition most of the seats while the former governing party got only two seats with 22 per cent of the popular vote. Huh? Our voting system wasn't creating legislatures that mirrored how we voted. I didn't know if there was a better voting system out there, but I hoped there was.

Our common goal was to make a decision, whatever it might be, that most, if not all of us, could agree on. We met at the Wosk Centre in downtown Vancouver in a room with tiered circular rows of seats, similar to the parliaments of many European countries that use proportional representation. It was a great place for 160 people to work together in a truly democratic fashion. We met every second weekend during the learning phase. During plenary sessions we would learn about voting systems, then engage in smaller breakout group discussions.

At the end of the learning phase we were asked to produce a preliminary statement that would include which alternate voting system we were considering. We didn't feel this was appropriate—how could we honestly say that we were

listening to the public if we had already made a choice before attending the public hearings scheduled for April and May? So our report instead discussed our criteria for judging voting systems. It included a description of our process, as well as encouraging people to come out to our 50 public hearings—about 3,000 people did! And during the summer, we received 1,600 written submissions. Most commissions hold only a few public hearings and might receive a hundred or so submissions. So the response to our work was incredible!

As some of us read through these submissions, we discussed them using a private online forum. This inspired some intense discussions that informed our weekend deliberations. Without the online forum and its debates I wouldn't have been able to develop my thoughts as well as I was able to.

At the beginning of the deliberation phase, we had two clear contenders for the alternate voting system: STV and MMP, or Mixed Member Proportional (a system that looks like the current system of ridings but gives additional seats to parties in order to achieve proportionality; Ontario voted on and rejected this system in 2007). We built a specific model of each one, debated their merits, and finally chose STV over MMP by a ratio of four to one.

An important issue for us was rural representation. It got a lot of "air time" during our plenary sessions. How could we design a system that was fair to all, regardless of where we lived? This led us to ask what local representation was. We decided that it had two different meanings: 1) the

STV is Worth Trying

By Seth Klein

No electoral system is perfect; each has strengths and weaknesses. But one thing is clear—our current First-Past-the-Post system produces perverse results and does not deliver good government. It tends to produce majorities that govern with impunity, prepared to put their ideological agenda ahead of the public will. So why not experiment with another system?



A common concern about STV is that the ridings (particularly in rural BC) will be too large, undermining representation. Yet how effective was people's representation between 2001 and 2005, when the current system produced a Liberal sweep across all ridings save two in East Vancouver? I can recall traveling around the province in 2002 giving talks, as communities sought to mobilize against the cuts of the Campbell government's first mandate, and I frequently heard the lament that people's MLAs simply refused to meet with them. It did not matter if the MLA's office was just down the street; if the door remained barred, representation was illusory.

Wouldn't it be far preferable to have a few MLAs representing your constituency, at least some of whom share your political orientation?

Another concern about STV is that the ballots will be large and complicated, much like the at-large municipal ballots. It is true that the ballots can be large under STV, but it is not complicated to simply rank as many choices as you wish. And unlike the municipal at-large system, which allows one party to virtually sweep all seats, because votes are ranked under STV, the result will more closely reflect the distribution of the popular vote.

Some don't like proportional representation because they fear that regular minority governments will result in gridlock and instability. But progressives have been well-served by minority governments. They have produced important changes that most Canadians support, including the Canada Pension Plan, the Guaranteed Income Supplement, increased federal transfers to the provinces, and Canada's most cherished social program—Medicare.

And given the historic breakdown of the popular vote in BC, proportional representation (including STV) could produce coalition governments made up of left-leaning parties (the NDP and Greens).

The public is disillusioned with our current system. Voter turnout is falling. Let's try something new with the potential to breathe new life into our democracy.

Seth Klein is the Director of the CCPA's BC Office.

Let's try something new with the potential to breathe new life into our democracy.

STV Links & Information

No to BC-STV: www.nostv.org

British Columbians for STV: www.stv.ca

Citizens' Assembly on Electoral Reform: www.citizensassembly.bc.ca/public

A map of electoral boundaries and the number of members in each proposed riding are available at the BC Electoral Boundaries Commission: www.bc-ebc.ca

The referendum question will read as follows:

What Electoral System should British Columbians use to elect members to the Provincial Legislative Assembly?

- The Existing Electoral System (First Past the Post), or
- The Single Transferrable Vote Electoral System (BC-STV) proposed by the Citizens' Assembly on Electoral Reform

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The Case Against STV*

confined to Ireland, Malta, the Australian Senate and Tasmania. Only two parties have ever had their candidates elected to Malta's parliament, although other parties continually try. By contrast, with our existing first-past-the-post (FPTP) electoral system, British Columbians elected MLAs from four different political parties (NDP, Social Credit, Reform and Liberal) as recently as 1991 and from three different parties in 1996.

There are 37 registered political parties in BC. They don't all run candidates in all of the ridings, but most of them run candidates in one or more ridings. It is hard to support any claim that FPTP limits the choice offered voters or the ability of small parties to elect MLAs in BC; witness the Reform Party, or Gordon Wilson's Progressive Democratic Alliance in 1996. The issue for STV enthusiasts is not electing an MLA or two from small parties as much as it is about holding the balance of power in a coalition government.

British Columbians would be rolling the dice with a new electoral system and would have no basis for predicting the consequences. The only thing that can be said for certain about BC-STV is not about what kind of government it might deliver but about what the 20 regions with 85 MLAs would look like, how votes are cast and how votes are counted.

STV should be rejected because its multiple-MLA electoral areas decrease accountability, its complex rules for counting votes are not fair, and allegations made by its proponents are not true.

David Schreck is a political commentator, economist and former NDP MLA for North-Vancouver Lonsdale. Retired, he keeps active with his website, StrategicThoughts.com. He is Secretary-Treasurer for the No BC-STV Campaign Society.

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Reflections on the Citizens' Assembly*

constituency work of the MLAs; and 2) the partisan representation of voters in the legislature, that is, the ability of your MLA to represent your point of view about how government should be run and how it should handle the big issues. Given that only about half of us who vote get the MLA we chose means that most of us don't feel represented in this second way, even if we have an MLA who does great constituency work.

As we studied STV we realized that it would improve local representation. Even in a two-member district we are likely to have one MLA in the governing party and one in opposition. This gives us a choice of MLAs to approach about our concerns. And, since STV is a proportional voting system, the numbers of seats each party receives will closely match how we voted, further improving our partisan representation in the legislature.

Women's representation was another important issue. We learned that people vote as willingly for women as for men; the main stumbling block in the past was cultural. As culture has changed, countries with proportional voting systems have responded faster and elected more women. With our current system, the nomination process has

been a roadblock for women getting on the ballot. But with STV, parties can easily create gender balance within the lists of candidates they put forward in each district.

After lots of debate, our final decision was to recommend BC-STV to our fellow voters: 146 voted yes with just 7 against. We had reached our original goal: that most of us would support our final decision, whatever that might be.

We now have a second chance to consider which voting system is more likely to produce legislatures that actually reflect the way we vote. While my personal choice is clear, I urge you to study both systems based on the issues most important to you, choose one or the other, and support it with your vote on May 12, 2009.

Wendy Bergerud has worked for the Ministry of Forests since 1981. In 2003 she was randomly selected to be a member of the Citizens' Assembly on Electoral Reform from the Victoria-Hillside (now Victoria-Swan Lake) riding. She is now a director with Fair Voting BC (www.stv.ca) and is on the national council of Fair Vote Canada (www.fairvote.ca). She has been a member of CCPA for many years.

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The Ghost of Elections Past: STV in the 1952 and 1953 BC Elections

By Ben Isitt

As British Columbians debate a change in the voting system, let's not ignore our history. The STV model is often cast as a cutting-edge system, designed (or at least introduced to Canada) by the Citizens' Assembly on Electoral Reform. Rarely mentioned is British Columbia's earlier experience with the Single Transferable Vote.



In the 1952 and 1953 general elections, voters ranked candidates in accordance with an adapted STV system. The ruling Liberal government of the day—BC's last until 2001—had amended the Provincial Elections Act in a bid to keep the opposition Co-operative Commonwealth Federation (precursor to the NDP) out of office. In the words of contemporary observer and future Liberal leader Patrick McGeer, it provided W.A.C. Bennett's "ladder to power," inaugurating the Social Credit dynasty which effectively contained the socialist CCF "threat."

The early 1950s was a period of social and political flux. The Liberal and Conservative parties had united into a Coalition government a decade earlier, when the CCF won the most votes in a general election. This arrangement succeeded in keeping the socialists at bay, preventing a wartime victory like the one in Saskatchewan, where Tommy Douglas and the CCF took power. Following in the footsteps of Douglas's innovative social policies, the BC Coalition enfranchised Asian and Aboriginal voters and implemented the Hospital Insurance Act prior to the 1949 election. However, the tenuous financing structure of this new social program led to spiraling cost overruns and the Coalition's collapse in 1951.

The final act of co-operation between the Liberals and Conservatives was passage of the Provincial Elections Act Amendment Act, which introduced the Single Transferable Vote in the spring legislative session of 1951. The plan had been endorsed by both parties at conventions in the 1940s.

The new system required voters to rank their preference of candidates (first, second, third, fourth). Candidates receiving the fewest votes

were eliminated and preferences transferred until one candidate received an absolute majority of ballots cast. Unlike the new BC-STV system proposed for the upcoming referendum, the 1950s voting system applied to both single-member and multiple-member constituencies, such as those in Vancouver, Burnaby, and Victoria, and ballots were counted differently in multiple-member constituencies.

The Liberals expected to receive the second preferences of Conservative voters, while Conservatives expected to be ranked second by Liberal voters. One or the other party would retain the reins of power and keep the CCF out of office. But William Andrew Cecil Bennett, the eclectic Kelowna hardware merchant and erstwhile Conservative who had left the Coalition in its dying days, threw a wrench in their plans. Linking up with the ruling Social Credit party in Alberta (in office since 1935), Bennett traveled the province by car and invested \$10,000 of his own funds. He buoyed the skeletal campaigns of 47 Social Credit candidates—none of whom had ever served in the legislature. They were accountants, school teachers, musicians, and small-town businessmen, political outsiders like himself who resented the tight political clique that ruled from the Vancouver Club and Victoria's Union Club.

On election day, 12 June 1952, British Columbians went to the polls and the results were unclear. It took a month to count the ballots as the labyrinthine STV procedure unfolded. Initially, the CCF received the most first-preference votes—which would have translated into 21 seats in BC's 48 seat legislature under the old voting system, a strong

STV provided W.A.C. Bennett's "ladder to power," inaugurating the Social Credit dynasty which effectively contained the socialist CCF "threat."

that about 50 per cent of the votes are for the candidate who is elected. By contrast, under BC-STV about 90 per cent of the votes in a five-member riding will have contributed to the election of at least one MLA. Thus, a far higher number of voters will feel they have an MLA who represents them in the legislature, and this will lead to increased voter satisfaction and participation.

In conclusion, the legislature or parliament we get with FPTP is frequently not the one the voters wanted or voted for, resulting in public policies that are different from those wanted by the public—a situation which risks leaving voters cynical and weakening democracy. Many of these problems can be solved or, at least, alleviated by adopting an alternative electoral system. The Single Transferable Vote system (BC-STV) was overwhelmingly recommended by the BC Citizens' Assembly on Electoral Reform as the best system for BC. We agree.

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to negotiate with other parties in order to have a majority with which to run the government, or possibly to form a coalition. Sometimes, to make a coalition work, a small party has to be brought into the government, a development that would give them more clout than their voter support warrants because they can threaten to pull out of the coalition, possibly leading to the fall of the government.

No electoral system is perfect, and a different electoral system is not necessarily a panacea for the widespread political alienation being experienced by people living in liberal democracies, whatever their electoral system. Citizens tell pollsters that they feel powerless politically. A change in voting procedures will still leave them “mere” voters, able to elect representatives from candidates put forward by parties, but unable to have much control over the policies a party or government will adopt.

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claim for a minority CCF government. However, as the second, third, and fourth preferences were redistributed, it became apparent that Social Credit was the preferred second-choice of voters from the three established parties.

Social Credit—untested and untainted in the legislature—edged out the CCF, 19 seats to 18. The Liberals and Conservatives fell to six and four seats respectively. In August 1952, W.A.C. Bennett became premier with a minority Social Credit government. The next spring, he engineered his own defeat in the legislature, won a majority mandate in a snap election, and then promptly repealed the Provincial Elections Act changes. British Columbia returned to the old first-past-the-post, simple-plurality voting system that prevails to this day.

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