

## What the Citizens Assembly didn't say.

Written by

Thursday, 03 March 2005 03:20 - Last Updated Thursday, 03 March 2005 03:20

---

### What the Citizens' Assembly Didn't Say

**David Schreck:** March 2, 2005 - If British Columbians vote yes to STV on May 17th, they might be in for some big surprises after the election. The report that was distributed to every household by the Citizens' Assembly contains many misleading and inaccurate claims about what STV would do. What is not so obvious are two important items that are not in the report, and not on the Assembly's website - draft legislation and possible electoral boundaries. Someone who takes advantage of BC's provisions for a citizen sponsored referendum, an initiative, must provide the precise legislation that would be adopted should a yes vote succeed. There is a very good reason for that. When British Columbians overwhelmingly voted in favour of initiative and recall in 1991, no one knew exactly what it meant. There is no other parliamentary democracy that uses initiative or recall. The government of the day was criticized for taking several years to draft legislation. Gordon Campbell campaigned on a promise to make recall easier, but that is one of his many broken promises. Some of the same problems will emerge if legislators need to interpret how to implement what the Assembly has termed "BC-STV".

Apparently the Citizens' Assembly system has "BC" hyphenated to STV because unlike the Irish system, it allows as few as 2 and as many as 7 MLAs in one constituency. The Constitution of the Irish Republic prohibits any constituency from having fewer than 3 members. While no upper limit is set, the latest distribution of constituencies shows none with more than 5 members. If BC-STV is adopted, an electoral boundaries commission would have to draw new boundaries and determine how many MLAs would be elected in each one; the ratio of population to elected members would be roughly the same regardless of the size of any constituency. There would be enormous differences between constituencies with 2 members and those with 7. The fewer the number of MLAs, the less proportional is the outcome of any election. Small parties would have almost no chance of being elected in constituencies with 2 or 3 members. Before radically changing how BC elects members to the Legislative Assembly, voters should have some idea of what their constituency would look like. It takes an enormous leap of faith to vote for the recommendation of the Citizens' Assembly without a draft proposal on the number of constituencies, their boundaries and the number of MLAs in each.

Some supporters of the recommendation made by the Citizens' Assembly say that no one has to worry about anything other than how to vote. Don't worry about how the votes are counted, about how elections would be run, about election spending, or about the mysterious Droop quota. As long as you can mark 1, 2, 3 on a ballot, they say, the rest will be taken care of by those who know better. It is hard to believe that voters will support a system that is largely mysterious, but if they do, someone will have to answer the questions the Assembly avoided in order to draft the necessary legislation.

The Irish Election Act provides wording for its very complex voting procedures. Wording in a new BC Election Act would probably be similar. Some provisions in the Irish Election are similar to what is found in the BC Election Act, provisions for registering voters, what to do if a candidate dies, and provisions for establishing polling districts are common in many election laws. A lot of the BC Election Act deals with political party and campaign finance. Much of that would have to be changed if constituencies suddenly were made much larger. A party can

## What the Citizens Assembly didn't say.

Written by

Thursday, 03 March 2005 03:20 - Last Updated Thursday, 03 March 2005 03:20

---

currently spend about \$70,000 per constituency. Would the spending limit be seven times larger in a seven member constituency? If a party could spend almost a half million in a giant constituency, how much could a lone independent candidate spend? Someone has to answer these questions if BC-STV were ever to be implemented. The Citizens' Assembly didn't. It is obvious that none of the kinds of questions candidates and parties have to consider were contemplated by the Assembly. As someone on a discussion list recently wrote, would you redesign the health care system without talking to doctors? The Assembly appears to have ignored any practical advice on the redesign of BC's voting system, but someone will have to do that work before their recommendation could be implemented. That means voters will be asked to take another leap of blind faith since they cannot see the legislation that would be implemented if the recommendation is adopted and that legislation could contain some big surprises.