



Vitalizing democracy through participation

British Columbia, Canada: Citizens' Assembly on Electoral Reform

- Case Study (Draft) -

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1. General Background

Country

Canada is a nation of about 34 million people, spread across the second largest land mass of any country in the world. The country is a federation of ten provinces and three territories, established by an act of the British parliament in 1867. Today, Canada's population is relatively urbanized and highly diverse: with one of the highest rates of immigration of the OECD countries, Statistics Canada projects that, by 2031, approximately 28% of the population will be foreign-born, and visible minorities will make up the majority of the population in Toronto and Vancouver. Canada is officially bilingual, French and English, with 22% claiming French as their mother tongue. Unofficially, however, Canada is multilingual, with another 19% claiming a mother tongue other than French or English. Canada is a relatively wealthy country with a per capita nominal GDP of about \$45,000 per year. With a Gini coefficient of 32.1, income distribution is more equal than in the United States, and somewhat less equal than in Germany. Canada's social welfare system is less robust than most European countries. Nonetheless, Canada does relatively well in global comparisons of human development, ranking eighth in the world in the 2010 UNDP index.

Canada's form of government is based on the British Westminster parliamentary system of unified powers and electoral systems comprised of single-member districts. Compared to other OECD countries, Canada's federal government is relatively weak, while provincial governments are relatively strong. One consequence is that federal political initiatives are highly brokered among provincial governments, while most domestic policy innovation is generated at the provincial level. Because of the regionalization of Canada's political parties, federal governments are typically based on minority mandates. Weak federalism often produces policy gridlock. At the provincial level, governments can often claim majority mandates, but Westminster-style unified power systems produces governments that have few institutional incentives to consult with the people between elections. As a consequence, Canadian governments—like governments in most of the OECD democracies—suffer from declining trust and citizen disaffection. For these reasons, Canada's political systems are ripe for democratic renewal.

Region/City

British Columbia (BC), Canada's western-most province with a population of just over 4 million people, is known within Canada for its polarized politics, rooted in its history as a resource-based economy that pitted large resource extraction companies against unionized labour. While the BC economy is now more diversified, two major parties—the BC Liberals and the New Democratic Party (NDP)—continue to represent these underlying cleavages. BC political culture is, on average, populist and distrustful. That said, over the last two decades, BC has absorbed many new immigrants, attracted urban, life-style-oriented professionals, and developed a small technology sector. These developments have dampened the old business-labour cleavages while introducing a third party—the Green Party—into the BC political landscape. Municipal politics has been somewhat less fractious than provincial politics: the city of Vancouver and its suburbs are well-known for innovative urban planning built around careful consultations and consensus-based processes. Social service agencies often work closely with affected populations to improve services. Neighbourhoods are alive and well, and Vancouver consistently ranks among the best cities in the world in which to live.² Background and Purpose of the Project/Program

2. Background and purpose of the project/program

The British Columbia Citizens' Assembly on Electoral Reform (BCCA) was born out of dissatisfaction with the province's single member plurality (SMP) electoral system—a system in which districts are represented by a single winning candidate, in contrast to the proportional representation (PR) systems that operate in Europe, in which multi-member districts send representatives to the legislature roughly in proportion to the votes cast. In BC, many political activists blame the SMP system for producing fractious, poorly functioning governments, and unfair distributions of seats among parties. The Green Party, which consistently polls over 10 percent, has never been represented in the provincial legislatures.

The events that triggered the BCCA were two elections that produced results of questionable legitimacy as a direct result of its SMP electoral system. In 1996, the BC Liberals received 42% of the vote against 39% for the New Democratic Party (NDP). Owing to the way votes were distributed, however, the NDP won a majority of seats in the provincial legislature (39 seats compared to 33 for the Liberal Party)—a result that can easily result from the winner-take-all rules of SMP systems. The leader of the minority Liberal Party, Gordon Campbell, promised to institute a “citizens' assembly” to consider whether a change in the electoral system was needed and, if so, to design a new electoral law, should the Liberals gain power. In the election of 2001, the Liberals won, and they did so in a way that confirmed the urgency of a reform. Their 57.62% share of the popular vote granted them 77 out of 79 seats. Though the NDP won 21.56% of the vote, they controlled only two seats. The Green Party, with its 12.39% vote share, received no seats at all. Again, these results were not in keeping with the normal expectations of Westminster parliamentary systems, which are supposed to produce an opposition that holds the party of government accountable.

The new Liberal government kept their promise. In 2003, the Citizens' Assembly was formally established and funded with \$5.5 million. An Assembly chairman and other key staff were also appointed to carry out preparatory work necessary for the Assembly to convene in January 2004. From January to November 2004, the 160 assembly members met, in three distinct phases, to deliberate about the existing electoral system and alternatives to it. The Assembly's mandate, however, did not include the ultimate power to select a new system. The Assembly could formulate a detailed proposal and the citizens of British Columbia—not the legislature—would have the final say through a popular referendum.

Though an unorthodox body, the Citizens' Assembly was a creature of normal legislative authorization. In 2002, the newly elected provincial government appointed a former legislator and Liberal party leader, Gordon Gibson, to recommend a format for the assembly. Months after Gibson's report was submitted, the government appointed the assembly's chair (Jack Blaney, a former university president), and submitted a motion to the Legislature to establish the assembly. In April 2003, the motion was approved unanimously, and a special committee of the legislature was set up to monitor the set up of the assembly and its work.

3. Structure, Process and Activities

Structure

The enabling legislation specified that assembly would include 158 British Columbia residents—two for each riding, be staffed by a chair and secretariat, work all through the year 2004, and be granted a budget of \$5.5 million to conduct this business. Importantly, the budget enabled a well-staffed process, including an Executive Assistant to the Chair, a Chief research officer, an Associate research officer, a Chief operations officer, a Project coordinator and member liaison, an Office manager, a Director of communication, and an Associate director of communication. The budget also provided for facilitators for small group sessions. This level of staffing, most agreed, allowed the Assembly to run smoothly. Members believed they were well supported.

The selection process began in August 2003 and continued through December. First, the voter registry for each riding was updated. Then, 100 men and 100 women were randomly selected from the list for each of the 79 ridings yielding a total of 15,800 names. This sample was then stratified by age cohort as well as gender in each riding. The people selected through this near-random draw were all invited by letter to participate in selection meetings in their ridings. Due to a low response rate, additional names were drawn in some districts. Over 23,000 invitation letters were sent. From these, approximately 1,700 voters expressed interest in participating in the Citizens' Assembly, and 964 ended up attending selection meetings that provided information on the assembly's mandate and operations, on the commitment required of members, and the selection process. Of those who attended, 158 were randomly selected, one male and one female elector per district. The names of those who had participated in selection meetings but had not been drawn were kept in case the Assembly required substitutes. This process produced no aboriginal representation, and later one male and one female aboriginal citizen were added to the Assembly by random draw from those who had attended the meetings but had not been selected. At the end of this process, the Assembly was composed of 160 members and a chair who would vote only in the event of a tie.

The legislative mandate aimed to create a body that would be independent as well as representative. The Citizens' Assembly was charged with analyzing electoral models for British Columbia with the only constraint that any recommendations be consistent with the Constitution of Canada and the Westminster parliamentary system. The Citizens' Assembly could recommend retaining the status quo or it could propose a single detailed alternative electoral system consistent with this broad constraint. By design, the deliberations of the Assembly were to be insulated from interference by political parties. Furthermore, the materials and experts were to be chosen so that no particular alternative received special emphasis or preference.

The BCCA had the power to propose a system, but not to make it into law. The Assembly's recommendations were due by the end of December 2004. If it offered a new model, the proposal would be submitted to popular referendum on May 17, 2005 at the time of the provincial general election. The referendum would pass only if it received a "double-majority" approval of at least 60% of the votes cast throughout the province and a simple majority approval in at least 60% of the 79 ridings (that is, at least 50% + 1 of the votes in at least 48 ridings). Some criticized the required

majority as too stringent, but others contended that a super-majority was appropriate to ratify a measure of constitutional importance and to ensure adequate support from the entire province.

Process and Activities

The BCCA conducted its work in three phases: a learning phase in which members learned about electoral systems; a public hearing phase, in which members sought to hear from members of the general public; and finally a deliberation phase, in which members deliberated over the question of whether to recommend a new electoral system, and, if so, what kind.

Some political scientists devote their entire careers to understanding various voting systems and their consequences. Most members, by contrast, felt that they knew relatively little about electoral systems. As they started, they gave themselves an average of only 4.3 on a ten-point scale when asked what they knew about voting rules. Therefore the first order of business was for the Assembly's 160 members to master the fundamentals of this field. During an initial "learning phase," the Assembly convened for six weekends (Saturday and Sunday morning) from January to late March. During these meetings, experts lectured members on electoral models in large-group sessions, members met in small groups to discuss and debate what they heard and read, and then they met in plenary to share their views. Members were randomly assigned to small groups of 10-15 members each, and groups changed every weekend to favour team building.

The lecturers and topics of the learning phase were carefully selected by Assembly staff to be impartial. The curriculum plan was reviewed by a special committee of academics and experts. Canadian as well as international political scientists instructed the groups on topics such as the role of parliament, elections and the five major families of electoral systems (majority, plurality, party list, single transferable vote, and mixed). Written materials were provided to Assembly members and senior political science graduate students facilitated their small group discussions.

During this phase, important steps were taken to develop relationships, communicative norms, and *esprit de corps* among participants. Members stayed in a hotel adjacent to the Wosk Centre, a conference room with seating and desks arranged in circular tiers, which was the venue for the Citizens' Assembly. Members ate all their meals together and often organized social events when the Assembly was not in session. They were also asked to articulate the values that should guide and regulate their interactions with one another. The assembly adopted by consensus values such as respect of all opinions, integrity, open-mindedness and inclusivity.

The learning phase was followed by a public hearings phase that ran from May to June 2004. Individual Assembly members hosted some fifty hearings across the province to listen to their fellow citizens' opinions on electoral reform and gather feedback from the general public. Members went to some in their home area but also attended hearings in other areas to hear what people in different communities thought. In these meetings Assembly members also heard the arguments of interest groups, advocacy organizations and political parties, ranging from the British Columbia Nurses' Union to the B.C. Green Party. Scribes recorded these sessions and produced summaries of all presentations. Approximately 3,000 people participated in public hearings that drew anywhere from 20 to 150 participants apiece. Besides public hearings, the Assembly also received some 1,600 written submissions that members read on-line or in print. Overall, the hearings highlighted support for a more proportional system, mainly some kind of mixed member

proportional (MMP) system. The status quo majoritarian system received limited support in these hearings.

The third and final “deliberation phase” of the Assembly unfolded between September and November 2004. Up until this point, members had been asked mainly to learn and then listen. In the final three short months, however, they had to develop a recommendation for the electoral system that best suited British Columbia. During deliberation, members were prompted to identify the most important values for their electoral system. Fair results, understood as proportionality between votes and seats, local representation, and voter choice emerged as the three most important values. These became the criteria that members would use to judge alternatives.

From the beginning of the deliberation phase, it was clear that few supported the status quo single-member plurality (SMP) system and that most favoured some form of proportional representation. Members were instructed to identify and rank the values they wished an electoral system to maximize. From a relatively long list of almost a dozen values, the members decided upon three: an electoral system should maximize proportionality, voter choice, and local representation. The Assembly then focused upon the two systems most likely to maximize these values: the single transferable vote (STV) system and the mixed member proportional (MMP) system.

STV is a proportional representation system that combines multi-member districts with a preferential ballot. Voters have single vote, but they rank the candidates in their order of preference. When a candidate has enough votes to win a seat, subsequent ballots are distributed to the next preferred candidate until that candidate is either elected or dropped off the ballot, and so on. STV is used in Ireland, Malta, the upper house in Australia, and for a number of regional and local representative bodies. A mixed member proportional system (MMP) combines election of representatives from single member geographical constituencies with representatives allocated on the basis of the proportion of votes for a party, such that a party's proportion of seats in the legislature mirrors their proportion of the votes. MMP is used for federal and most state legislatures in Germany (where it is known as “personalized proportional representation.”) as well as in New Zealand and Scotland.

After deciding that STV and MMP were the their two viable alternatives, members then spent two weekends (one on each) developing a version of each system for British Columbia. The final choice came after thoughtful deliberation about the characteristics of the two options. Throughout the deliberation phase, members gave important reasons to support their system of choice. Some favoured MMP because it balances local and proportional representation, combining “the best of both worlds” and expanding voter choice. According to a member, “a lot of people don't vote for lack of choice” and a more proportional system could reduce voter apathy by allowing small parties to emerge, thus creating more options for different constituencies. MMP would be particularly beneficial for individuals who live in areas where an ideology dominates because it allows “people who have alternative views [...] to voice those views.” Another argued that “there's a better chance with MMP for women and minorities to get elected.” If MMP gives electors more options, with a district representative and a list vote, it also gives parties too much power, and uncontested seats, whereas “there is no safe seat under STV.” Some preferred STV over MMP because it focuses more on individual candidates and “reduces party discipline.” A member in support of STV reminded that the much of the disillusionment with politics stemmed from excessive party power

“why are we here? We are here because of the problems created by parties, not by candidates [...] here's our chance to change it.” Members of the sparsely populated northern region were especially concerned with local representation and favoured STV, with its smaller districts, over MMP. Observers report that the quality of these deliberations was generally quite high. Members showed a nuanced understanding of electoral systems, acknowledged the advantages and disadvantages of both options, and tried to reduce disagreements.

After several weekends of deliberation, the Assembly used secret ballots to tally its members' judgments. In the first vote, the group selected the STV system over MMP (123 votes for STV against 31 for MMP). In the final vote, the overwhelming majority (146 in favour, 7 against) supported a recommendation that a referendum be put to the citizens of British Columbia that STV replace the current single-member plurality system.

4. Impact/Outcome, and Influence on Political Decisions

The key outcome of the Citizens' Assembly was a referendum question. On May 17, 2005, British Columbians were asked to answer yes or no to the following: “Should British Columbia change to the BC-STV electoral system as recommended by the Citizens' Assembly on Electoral Reform?”

Although the Citizens' Assembly was the Liberal Party premier's initiative, only the Green Party endorsed the STV proposal. Even there, the Greens preferred MMP to STV, but preferred STV to the *status quo*. Gordon Campbell praised the Assembly as a process that could be employed in other areas such as health and education, but the political parties remained largely silent regarding the merits and weaknesses of the proposal. British Columbians could learn about the Assembly's work by watching the recordings of the Assembly's sessions, which broadcast repeatedly over the provincial legislature's television service. The Assembly also maintained constant communication with the media, and had a continually updated website, which, by November 2004, had attracted over 47,000 visitors from 148 countries. In March 2005, a “NO” coalition formed, comprising personalities from across the political spectrum, to counter the “YES” coalitions (which included a group formed by former Assembly members). Despite these public information campaigns, polling evidence suggested that by the time of the referendum about half of British Columbia voters were unaware of the referendum.

Although many voters reported limited knowledge of the referendum question on the days preceding the vote, the STV proposal nearly passed. It won by simple majority in 77 out of 79 ridings, easily passing one hurdle of the double super-majority requirement. But it won 57.4% of the total votes cast, falling a few points short of the required 60%. This result surprised many media observers who predicted that the STV proposal would clearly lose. A majority of votes, albeit close to the required percentage, was not enough to scrap the current system. The leaders of the three major parties, the Liberals, the NDP and the Greens, all agreed that the referendum results clearly signalled the public's discontent. As Premier Gordon Campbell remarked “There's a real hunger to move and look at ways of improving our system [...] I've been a clear advocate of that and I'm going to look at that in different ways in the future.” The NDP leader proposed that a new Citizens' Assembly should look at a new model; others suggested that the legislature should examine the issue. Many other Canadian provinces started working on electoral reform, and Ontario launched a similar citizen assembly, led by a judge and followed by a referendum.

In September 2005, the government committed to re-submit the STV system to a referendum in November 2008, so that a possible new system could be used for the 2009 provincial elections. Cognizant of some of the reasons that led to the referendum's defeat, the Liberal government promised funding for opponents and supporters of the STV system to make the cases for and against before the public of British Columbia. In addition, the government asked the Electoral Boundaries Commission to provide a map of ridings under the proposed STV system. Furthermore, the wording of the 2008 referendum question was to be crafted by government and debated by the legislature. But owing to the costs of holding a separate election as well as to accommodate the work schedule of the Electoral Boundaries Commission, the government delayed the referendum until May 2009, when it could be combined with the general election. This time the province's voters defeated the STV proposal with only 38.82% voting in favour. Research conducted by political scientists at the University of British Columbia suggested an interesting reason for these sharply differing outcomes. In 2005, voters focused on the Citizens' Assembly as much or even more than they focused on the substantive question. When citizens paid attention to the Citizens' Assembly, they trusted it, when then inclined them to vote yes. They treated the BCCA as what political scientists call a "trusted information proxy." Even though citizens did not fully understand electoral systems or the STV proposal, they followed the lead of their fellow citizens who had put time, effort, and intelligence into constructing an alternative for British Columbia. In 2009, however, the memory of the Citizens' Assembly had faded, and was replaced with a divisive public debate, in which each side sought to increase distrust of the other side. It is likely that voters, lacking a trusted information proxy and failing to invest in knowledge of a somewhat arcane topic, voted conservatively, when they bothered to vote at all.

5. Number of Participants, Representativeness, and Inclusion

How representative and inclusive was the BCCA? The enabling legislation required that the 158 members of the Citizens' Assembly were "to be broadly representative of the adult population of British Columbia, particularly respecting age, gender, and geographical distribution." There are many ways to produce a body that "represents" the whole population. The Citizens Assembly was chosen through modern techniques of random selection from a sample stratified by geography, gender, and age. A list of names was to be randomly selected from the provincial voters' list, with an equal number drawn from the 79 ridings. An equal number of men and women were to be drawn and selection methods aimed to mirror the age distribution of citizens over 18 in the province. Participants would be paid an honorarium of \$150 per day so as to mitigate economic disadvantages; daycare, transportation and accommodation were also provided to make it easier for people with lower incomes and those who lived far from Vancouver to participate.

Another important feature of the Assembly was that elected officials and those professionally connected to political parties were *excluded* from the selection process. The designers of the Assembly wished to insure that no member of the Assembly would have conflict of interest in recommending an alternative electoral system, and could be said to represent the interests of the electorate of British Columbia. This way of constructing the assembly, the designers thought, would ensure a balance of interests and incorporate the views of ordinary citizens into basic electoral law.

The assembly that resulted from this process was reasonably reflective of the demographics of British Columbia—a very important characteristic in such an ethnically and linguistically diverse jurisdiction. But it was not perfectly so. The selection process required that those randomly invited to submit their names into the pool from which the membership would be selected respond affirmatively to the invitation. The process thus incorporated an element of self-selection: potential members had to be willing to serve. This element of self-selection probably resulted in an assembly that was somewhat older, somewhat more educated, and somewhat more likely to be English-speaking than the population of British Columbia as a whole. That said, because no one could be forced to serve, there is probably no good alternative to this element of self-selection.

6. Impact on Democratic Capacities: Structural and Cultural

As a political innovation, the BC Citizens' Assembly was important because it combined four distinct democratic devices—near-random selection, learning and deliberation, and direct democracy—into a single process, in an attempt to complement the strengths of each while mitigating their weaknesses. The strength of random selection is that it constitutes a body that is highly reflective of the population from which the selection is drawn, and is thus likely to be more inclusive of views that are typically not part of political bodies. While a strength of this kind of citizens' body is its representativeness, most citizens lack the expertise necessary to make good policy decisions. For this reason, the Citizens' Assembly process was complemented by learning and deliberation processes that, quite literally, transformed lay citizens into experts. Another weakness of random selection is that it lacks the accountability mechanisms of elections: members do not have to submit themselves to their fellow citizens for approval. But election is not the only kind of democratic accountability, and the BCCA made use of another device: the referendum. The Citizens' Assembly model built accountability into the back end of the process by empowering the Assembly *not* to choose a new electoral system, but rather to produce a referendum question. In this way, the citizens of British Columbia could use a directly democratic device to hold the Assembly to account for its work. And yet referendums by themselves are often flawed by the fact that citizens do not know enough about the issue to make an informed decision. The Citizens' Assembly process compensated for this weakness by providing citizens with a trustworthy "information proxy", comprised of ordinary citizens without vested interests in the results. In this way, the Citizens' Assembly process could compensate, at least in principle, for citizens' lack of knowledge about electoral systems.

We do not yet know whether the Citizens' Assembly model will have a lasting impact. It was clear that the BCCA had a deep impact upon participants: they were transformed into enthusiastic, engaged, and knowledgeable citizens. It is less clear that the BCCA left a mark on the political process: politicians often view engaged citizens with suspicion. With rare exceptions, they turn to new democratic processes only faced with no-win political choices. In British Columbia, the Citizens' Assembly model has not been replicated. But neither has it disappeared from public discourse: having been demonstrated once, many see it as a possible process for tackling broad public issues such as public education governance and the sustainability of health care budgets. More generally, politicians and administrators may find the device an attractive alternative for issues that are too difficult for standard electoral institutions or public bureaucracies to handle without an additional "legitimacy producing" institution. In the case of the BCCA, it is important that

the leaders of the Liberal Party decided that some kinds of issues—in this case, electoral reform—are most legitimately dealt with by the people rather than by politicians.

7. Evaluation of the Project: Challenges and Lessons Learned

Although the Citizens' Assembly ingeniously delegated important powers to ordinary citizens, it also attracted some criticisms regarding its design and operation. Random selection of members was meant to make the body representative of the public at large. But citizens were not obliged to participate, as they are in legal juries. They were free to decline. It is likely that many of the members who accepted were more active and civic-minded than the population at large. Participating in the Assembly might also have been more appealing to reformers than to those who were satisfied with the status quo. The selection process insured equal representation by geography, gender, and age group, but not ethnicity, aboriginal status, or socio-economic status. If the selection criteria granted equal representation to men and women, why not ensure also that the voices of disadvantaged groups or of citizens of specific ethnic origin be represented? Finally, it remains unclear whether members felt they were representing their personal views, their districts, what emerged from the hearings, or the province at large. Would the Assembly have made different decisions with different selection mechanisms and notions of representation?

In terms of equality of the deliberations, inevitably, some members spoke more than others, with interventions from men outnumbering those of women or minorities. Although the chair encouraged first-time speakers to engage, more formal inclusion rules could have levelled the playfield for all participants. That said, the BCCA mixed large, public sessions with small, closed working groups led by skilled facilitators, in part to overcome these kinds of deliberative biases.

Other critics suspect that the process of deliberation was consciously or unconsciously steered by staff. Members composed neither the structure of the Assembly's deliberations, its timing, nor its agenda. Staff decisions regarding these factors, as well as the educational materials and the selection of experts who spoke to Assembly members, may have biased their deliberations. At the same time, the Assembly had multiple, independent sources of information and advice as well, much of it coming from public hearings and submissions, and even more from members who invested heavily in research which they shared with other members.

Additionally, critics notes that members had no choice over the priorities of reform, but were restricted by their mandate to focus solely on the electoral law, neglecting other important elements, such as electoral districts, or campaign finance. And yet the mandate of the assembly was legitimate, in part, because it came directly and specifically from an elected government. Moreover, some argued that a clear, limited agenda was empowering: it ensured that the Assembly would deliver a clear, actionable conclusion.

The deliberation phase was particularly complicated because the Assembly mandate required that the different options that had been explored in previous phases had to be narrowed down and eventually coalesce into one proposal. The process of selecting the desirable characteristics of a model, for example, was hastened, and issues such as women representation received less attention than some wished. The group ended up selecting the three characteristics that were at

the top of the lecturer's list of desirable features of electoral models. Similarly, it was unclear whether the Assembly had the authority to modify the number of electoral districts and the number of parliamentary seats, which would have been required to adopt the MMP system. The Assembly chair clarified that the number of seats could not be altered, which might have prompted members to select the STV system because it required less change. It appears that more time was devoted to illustrating the STV system, while the technical details of applying the MMP model to British Columbia were left unexplored. The tension between exploring options and reaching consensus around a model emerged during the deliberation phase, and it remains unclear whether members would have favoured the MMP system had they had more time to work through its complexities. That said, any such process is subject to scarcities of time and attention, and the proper question is whether a majority of members were, somehow, denied the opportunity to work the MMP model. In fact, it appears that the members drifted away from the (initially favoured) MMP model and toward the STV model as a consequence of the public hearing phase of the process.

In the end, the referendum proposal, although supported by a substantial majority of the population, did not pass. Perhaps it did not deserve to pass. Despite its potential problems, there is little doubt that the deliberations of the Assembly were rich and serious. The larger public debate about the STV proposal was anemic by comparison. Although the government provided Assembly members with ample opportunities to become experts in electoral systems, it did not make a comparable investment to educate the general public before the referendum. For the most part, political parties and politicians did not engage this quasi-constitutional question. Despite this deafening silence, the majority of citizens voted against the very system that elected their government. After that popular rebuke, one observer remarked, "the real deliberation will begin."

The results of the British Columbia experience suggests that most serious issue for the Citizens' Assembly model rests not with the quality of the decision-making process, but rather with the connections between the Assembly and the broader public. These connections might be established in three ways: (1) *substantively*, through more extensive education of the public about the *issue* at hand; (2) through *trust*, through processes that enable the public to make credible judgments about whether to trust the Assembly to make decisions on behalf of the broader public; (3) through treating the Assembly not as advisory to the people, but rather to the *legislature*, much as might be the case with regular legislative committees.

8. Next Steps/Visions for the Future and Continuity of the Project

From the perspective of changing the electoral system of British Columbia, the Citizens' Assembly process might be judged a failure. Yet certainly good majority of voters in the first referendum—57.4%—judged the process favourably, and there is evidence that voters lost sight of the Assembly when the referendum was replayed some four years later. Perhaps more importantly, however, the Citizens' Assembly showed that ordinary citizens could tackle a complex, politically volatile issue and render a decision that most of their fellow citizens saw as legitimate. Perhaps the most remarkable outcome were survey results collected by political scientists at the University of British Columbia showing that a very solid majority of voters *trusted* the Citizens' Assembly. If these results are indicative, they suggest that citizens' assemblies might be used to handle other tough political issues, particularly in areas of political difficulty or gridlock, or areas in which elected politicians lack the legitimacy to deliberate and decide. Versions of citizens' assemblies were

subsequently held in Ontario and the Netherlands; they have been discussed in California as a way of remedying a referendum process that is producing unworkable state policies; and Iceland is in the process of constituting a citizens' assembly for the purposes of reworking their constitution. While it is unlikely that electoral reform will be addressed any time soon in British Columbia, the citizens' assembly concept is now considered to be a live option for difficult public policy issues.

9. Transferability to Germany

As indicated by opinion surveys, the share of Germans demanding more say in political life has increased over the last few years, and, at the same time, they have become more critical towards the institutions and processes of representative democracy. Thus, implementing the British Columbia model in Germany as a means of vitalizing the processes of representative, electoral democracy, could make sense.

The apparent attractiveness of the British Columbia model of political participation is not only rooted in the content of the issue, it is also linked to the specific institutional design of citizen involvement. The "coupling" of deliberation by a huge number of randomly selected citizens and binding popular decision makes for the particular appeal of the model. When thinking about a transfer of the model to Germany, the question needs to be answered whether such an institutional design fits into the constitutional framework of the German political system. From this point of view, the British Columbia Model can be applied in Germany – for sure at the state and local level. At the federal level, under the given constitutional conditions, it would only be an option concerning the territorial reorganization of the states – at least as long as the final decision is made in a referendum. However, if the Citizens' Assembly was 'merely' used to provide support to the parliament, to draft a proposal for the elected representatives, the possible topics it could deal with would be broader. At the same time, the direct link between Citizens' Assembly and the referendum is part of its effectiveness. In any case, at the state and local level, there are less restrictions to implement a Citizens' Assembly and, particularly, a referendum as an instrument of citizen participation.

Regarding the substance of the issue, this model could contribute to a broader and more sophisticated debate on the role of elections in German democracy, particularly for the local electoral system. In this case, the responsibility for drafting a proposal on alternative local electoral systems could be attributed to a randomly selected Citizen Assembly at the state level, while a local referendum could be held in deciding on the choice of the particular electoral system. As the example of British Columbia shows, this would increase political knowledge and interest and could also strengthen support for electoral politics.

The aspect of financial resources, which amounted to more than 4 million Euros in the case of British Columbia, is a huge investment in a participatory process and could be problematic in the German context. In view of the high financial and organizational costs, the British Columbia participatory model is not an appropriate instrument in dealing with issues of daily politics, but should be reserved to highly salient matters on the fundamental problems of political life. In general, two types of topics for which a Citizens' Assembly could potentially prove relevant can be distinguished: (1) Topics in which the elected representatives and the political systems itself have a stake, such as party and campaign financing or electoral reform. (2) Decisions that have a

longterm effect that goes far beyond legislative terms, such as energy policy, health policy or social security reform.

At the same time, the BCCA proved that citizens are very much capable of being involved in complex political issues and that their contribution to the solution of a problem can be more than general statements: given the right setting and preparation they can work on complex policy details and arrive at a well-informed decision. There is no reason to believe that this would be any different in Germany. Given the great financial, organizational and time requirements, the topic for which a CA is brought into live should be considered well. Then, the CA is an effective tool to answer questions of fundamental importance with support from the broad public.