

Premier Gordon Campbell
Announcement of the Citizens' Assembly
April 28, 2003

Check Against Delivery

This is an important day for British Columbia because we're doing something that has never been done before in Canada.

On April 17, 1999, I stood before our convention in Kelowna and said it's time we gave the people of B.C. the right to determine how they want to elect their MLAs. Today we are beginning the process of making that commitment a reality.

Today the Attorney General will table two motions in the legislature that will launch the creation of a Citizens' Assembly.

We believe that letting citizens to set the rules for how they elect their representatives is a critical part of our democracy. Citizens should set the rules that politicians follow.

For the first time in our nation's history, we are providing voters with the opportunity to decide for themselves how they elect the people who sit in the legislature to represent them.

The motion that will be placed before the house gives the Citizens' Assembly the mandate to hold public hearings throughout B.C., and if it recommends changes to the current electoral system, that option will be put to a province wide referendum on May 17, 2005.

Many British Columbians have raised questions about our electoral model and how it can be improved. Prior to the 2001 election, there hadn't been a provincial government elected with more than 50 per cent of the popular vote since 1949.

There have also been instances where governments were elected with less of the popular vote and yet held more seats than other parties. Some have questioned whether that was right or not. They have legitimately asked, "Is this what we want in British Columbia? Is this what creates the most representative and most responsive legislature?"

That some believe these challenges are created by our current electoral system and process may not be reason enough to change the system, but they are questions worth asking in an open, democratic community.

The Citizens' Assembly gives us a publicly driven means of answering those questions. If there is a desire to change our system, that decision should be made by the people, not by politicians and not by those with vested interests in a particular political result. It should be made by the people who elect us.

Last September, the government asked Gordon Gibson to provide us with advice and recommendations to how the Assembly should be structured, and there were a number of principles that we wanted to ensure were upheld.

There should be a fair process for randomly selecting members in keeping with our earlier commitment that the Citizens' Assembly would be appointed similar to how a jury is selected.

It should represent people from all parts of the province and with a range of interests and backgrounds. As much as possible, it should be non-political. It should be large enough to be representative while still being effective and affordable. Mr. Gibson's recommendations also needed to be compatible with the Canadian Constitution and the Westminster Parliamentary System.

We are releasing Mr. Gibson's report today and the Attorney General is placing two motions on the orders of the day in the legislature. That means they can be called for debate two days from now.

The first motion outlines the terms of reference for the assembly and the assembly's chair. The second enables a special committee to be appointed to review and approve the government's nominee for chair, and to act as a reference group for the chair should he require their advice. The government is nominating Dr. Jack Blaney as the chair of the Citizens' Assembly.

Dr. Blaney has vast experience in bringing people together around a common goal. He is the former president of Simon Fraser University and is currently the chair of the Fraser Basin Council. He was the driving force behind Simon Fraser's Dialogue Centre in Vancouver. He is internationally recognized for his abilities as an educator, as a conceptual thinker and as a consensus builder – all qualities that will be required of the chair of the Citizens' Assembly.

It is equally important that the chair have the confidence of the legislature. The special committee that will be brought before the house will meet with Dr. Blaney to review his qualifications and to discuss his framework for the Citizens' Assembly.

The member for Vancouver-Hastings will sit on that committee and the committee's recommendations must be unanimous. If the committee decides to approve and recommend his appointment as the chair, the government will then formalize Dr. Blaney's appointment.

The assembly will have 159 members – two from every electoral district plus the chair. The members will be selected under a process approved and supervised by the Chief Electoral Officer. It is critical for the Assembly to consult with all British Columbians and to provide the opportunity for submissions both in writing and at public hearings.

After assessing various models, the assembly will issue its report and its decision must be adopted by a majority of the Citizens' Assembly. That report may recommend retaining the current model or the adoption of a new model.

If the assembly recommends retaining today's system, its report will end the matter. If the assembly decides to recommend another model, then that model will be put to a referendum during the provincial election on May 17, 2005.

For the proposed new model to be ratified, it must receive 60 per cent of overall voter approval as well as approval in 60 per cent of the province's electoral districts. It is critical that any system be designed to meet the needs of B.C. and meet the needs of all British Columbians in all the regions of the province.

However, we do not wish to have the pursuit of the perfect drive out the good. This double approval is meant to assure that one part of the province's population does not overwhelm the legitimate interests of another part of the province.

The very point of this exercise is to determine if there is a way to better reflect the will of the people in determining how their MLAs are elected, and it's important that we ensure strong public support in adopting any new model.

We do not know what the assembly will decide, but we do know that how we elect MLAs in B.C. will be up to those who elect us. I believe the results of this effort will be a restoration of trust in our public institutions, and a rekindling of interest in our public institutions throughout the province.

I trust that the results of the work of this Citizens' Assembly will strengthen public confidence in our system, and I want to thank beforehand all of those who agree to serve in this critically important task that lies before us. Thank you very much.