



Fair Vote Vancouver

Media Release
For Immediate Release

Group Forms to Prevent A New Error In Vancouver

VANCOUVER -- March 15, 2004 -- Today, local Vancouver democracy advocates announced a campaign to alert Vancouver city voters that a full wards system proposed for the city is the same flawed system we now have provincially and federally. It is widely acknowledged that the full wards system suffers from unbalanced -- and sometimes wildly unbalanced -- election results, a sense of wasted votes, and vote splitting when more than two parties or candidates run. Full ward systems also experience lower voter turnout and more non-participation when compared to other voting systems that incorporate proportionality or preferential voting. To address these problems at the provincial level a Citizen's Assembly on Electoral Reform has been called to examine other systems and make a recommendation to the voting public.

"Political leaders now in control at City Hall have set their sights on a full wards system for Vancouver, and are just going through the motions to implement that system," said Steve Kisby, a spokesperson for the group. "If implemented, we'll be stuck with that flawed system for years," continued Kisby.

"There is widespread interest and a great deal of public support for a more proportional municipal voting system, but changing from at large voting to full wards just replaces one unjust system with another", continued local Fair Vote Canada President Stephen Broscoe. "I don't see why that would be satisfactory to the voting public when fairer alternatives are available."

A full wards system is a system where City Council would comprise exclusively of councillors elected from single member wards using first-past-the-post voting.

The Berger Commission (the Vancouver Electoral Reform Commission) has been established to make recommendations on the City's electoral system. At the January 21, 2004, forum held at SFU's Harbour Centre Campus, its leading advisors/researchers argued for the full ward system "because it can be done now." They believe that such a change may be implemented without a change to the Vancouver Charter, however any change still needs provincial approval through an Order In Council.

"We call upon the Berger Commission to recommend to voters the best system, not just one they say can be done now," said Kisby, "To do otherwise would be short sighted."

Fair Vote Vancouver is made up of voters who came together in response to Vancouver's Electoral Reform Commission. They believe a voting system should be measured on these four principles: Proportionality (where there should be a close correspondence between the percentage of votes a party or political affiliation wins and the percentage of seats it wins), Voter Choice (where comparatively you want a voting system that is better at presenting the choices that voters want, and encourages voters to vote sincerely, rather than strategically), Local Representation (where all regions in Vancouver should be fairly represented in City Council), and Every Vote Counts (where the voting system should accord equal weight to all ballots cast and should minimize the wastage of votes).

A proportional wards system would meet the above principles.

The group's web site can be found at <http://www.alternatives.com/prorep> and can be contacted at fvv@alternatives.com

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Backgrounder

- What's wrong with a full ward system?

A full ward system is a first-past-the-post single member electoral district system. Implementing the full ward system at the local level in Vancouver would be implementing the same faulty system that is now used at the provincial and federal levels. It is widely acknowledged that the provincial system and federal system of first-past-the-post single member electoral districts or "wards" is a flawed system, so much so that, provincially in B.C., a Citizen's Assembly on Electoral Reform has been called to examine other systems and make a recommendation to the voting public. First-past-the-post single member ward systems are winner take all systems that suffer from unbalanced -- and sometimes wildly unbalanced -- election results, a sense of wasted votes, and "vote splitting" where there are more than two parties or candidates. This type of system experiences lower voter turnout and more non-participation when compared to other voting systems that incorporate proportionality or preferential voting.

- COPE strategists and Berger Commission advisors/researchers are saying that a proportional system with wards would be better but we can't do it now. They say it's better to implement the full ward system as a step towards a better system in the future.

Implementing the flawed full ward system now would mean that voters in Vancouver would be stuck with that system for decades. Only when pressed do COPE strategists and Berger Commission advisors/researchers say that it's a 'step towards' a better system.

- Why is the Berger Commission saying City Council can only do some changes now, and need provincial approval for other changes?

Berger Commission advisors/researchers have examined the Vancouver Charter and in their opinion the City has the legal authority to change the existing "at large" system to only a full ward system or a "mixed system" without a change to the Vancouver Charter. In the Commission's opinion, to implement other systems or reforms, such as a proportional system with wards or implementing spending reforms, requires a change to the Vancouver Charter which would need to be done by the Provincial government. Either way, any change requires provincial government approval through an Order In Council.

- The Berger Commission is saying that only the at large, wards, or mixed system (of at large and wards) are the main systems under consideration because of the limitations of the Vancouver Charter or because those are the only systems that have been supported by former mayors.

City Council has asked the Commission to report to Council on "other reforms for the improvement of civic democracy that would require amendments to the Vancouver Charter or other statutes in order to be implemented" and to "report to Council on the merits of the current at-large system, the ward system and other alternative systems." The Berger Commission has said that it "intends to make recommendations divided into two parts: What can the Council do on its own, and what will require provincial legislation."

It is fully within the mandate of the Commission to consider a proportional system or a proportional wards system. Further, within the commission's educational mandate we feel that the commission has an obligation to fairly present a proportional or a proportional wards system on par with the other three systems the Commission has presented.

- In 1996 there was a referendum on electoral reform in Vancouver. The referendum question was initially to be a choice between the existing "at large" system and a full ward system. Due to public pressure, that choice was expanded to two questions. The first was "are you in favour of keeping the existing system of election councillors" with the second being, if the existing system was to change, would you prefer a mixed system, proportional system, ward system, or other system.

In that 1996 referendum, 59.43% of Vancouver voters indicated they would like to keep the existing system of electing councillors "at large" whereby all voters can vote for all councillors.

- In the 1999 Vancouver election, COPE supported a proportional ward system. In the November 2002 election COPE dropped proportional and only promoted a full ward system.