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SPECIAL COMMITTEE ON THE
CITIZENS' ASSEMBLY ON
ELECTORAL REFORM

Victoria

Thursday, November 20, 2003

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**SPECIAL COMMITTEE ON THE
CITIZENS' ASSEMBLY ON ELECTORAL REFORM**

Victoria
Thursday, November 20, 2003

Chair: * John Les (Chilliwack-Sumas L)

Deputy Chair: * Jeff Bray (Victoria-Beacon Hill L)

Members: * Ida Chong (Oak Bay-Gordon Head L)
Kevin Krueger (Kamloops-North Thompson L)
Blair Lekstrom (Peace River South L)
* Rob Nijjar (Vancouver-Kingsway L)
* Joy MacPhail (Vancouver-Hastings NDP)

** denotes member present*

Clerk: Craig James

Committee Staff: Josie Schofield (Committee Research Analyst)

Witnesses: Dr. Jack Blaney (Chair, Citizens' Assembly on Electoral Reform)

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Citizens' Assembly on Electoral Reform

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MINUTES

SPECIAL COMMITTEE ON THE CITIZENS' ASSEMBLY ON ELECTORAL REFORM



Thursday, November 20, 2003
10:30 am
Birch Committee Room
Parliament Buildings, Victoria

Present: John Les, MLA (Chair); Jeff Bray, MLA (Deputy Chair); Ida Chong, MLA; Joy MacPhail, MLA;
Rob Nijjar, MLA.

Unavoidably Absent: Blair Lekstrom, MLA; Kevin Krueger, MLA

1. The Committee received a progress report regarding the status of the Citizens' Assembly on Electoral Reform.
Witness:
Dr. Jack Blaney
2. The Committee deliberated *in camera*.
3. The Committee deliberated in public session.
4. **Resolved**, that the Committee endorse the work of the Citizens' Assembly on Electoral Reform including recommendations made to the Attorney General by Dr. Jack Blaney regarding the composition of the Citizens' Assembly.
5. The Committee adjourned at 11:19 a.m. to the call of the Chair.

John Les, MLA
Chair

Craig James
Clerk Assistant and
Clerk of Committees

THURSDAY, NOVEMBER 20, 2003

The committee met at 10:36 a.m.

[J. Les in the chair.]

J. Les (Chair): We will call the meeting to order. The first item on the agenda, Dr. Blaney, would be a progress report on what you and your staff have been up to for these last several months.

Citizens' Assembly Progress Report

J. Blaney: Well, thank you, Mr. Chair. I'm very pleased to do it and very pleased to be here. I'm not going to quite follow the agenda, but kind of like that.

You all know this, but I'd just like to emphasize again the importance of what we're doing, because every meeting I go to, it's reinforced each time. We all know there are different kinds of innovations. There are engineering and science innovations, and there are social innovations. Of course, you are involved largely all your professional time as Members of the Legislative Assembly on social innovation.

Probably the most important social innovation in the history of the world has been the invention of democracy. Since then, 2,500 years ago, various organizations and peoples and states have kind of adopted it, improved it and adapted it to certain countries. Indeed, as we all know, it wasn't until the early 1900s that we allowed women to vote in this country, and it wasn't until 1947 that we allowed aboriginals to vote. So we're always improving on our democracy.

What we're doing here in B.C. is quite spectacular in the same sense. We are also involved in reinventing an important aspect of democracy, and that is citizen engagement. There is nowhere in the world, in modern democracies, that has done what we are doing in British Columbia. All the political scientists we've consulted have agreed and confirmed that nobody in the world is doing anything as inventive as what we are doing right here — in two ways.

We are looking at electoral reform, but a lot of people are looking at electoral reform. In fact, it's kind of the flavour of the year in Canada right now. P.E.I., New Brunswick, Quebec and Ontario are all looking at electoral reform, but it's the way we're doing it that makes us so different. Those other provinces — although Ontario is waiting to see what we do; they might copy us — have committees of the assembly. Or they send the job to some experts — lawyers or political scientists or whatever — for a report that comes back to the Legislature.

What we're doing, no one else has ever done before. We're giving it to the voters. We're looking at a review of the voting system. What we're saying is that we have confidence in the voters, and we're giving it to the voters to look at. No one has ever done that before, as remarkable as that might seem.

Secondly, what we're doing — which, again, just makes it quite extraordinary and people can't quite

believe — is that not only do we give it to the voters, but we're giving them power. We're giving voters power. The voters in the end may say, after an 11-month period.... And 11 months looking at this is something again. You know, when you consult voters, you give them an hour or two or a weekend. We're giving them 11 months.

Voters — this assembly — might say in the end: "On balance, I think we should keep what we've got. It's probably the best we've got." And if they do say that, my hunch is that will be the end of reviewing electoral reform for some time.

[1040]

On the other hand, if on balance they say, "We should change our system, and we should do it like this," that goes directly to a referendum in May 2005. My colleagues across the country and people I meet with in the United States can't believe that a government has given to non-elected citizens such an important task and such power. It's gaining attention right across the country and actually in several places in the world.

It's a very important initiative that we're undertaking, and I'm very proud to be a part of it. When I explain this to our citizens, they get truly excited about the adventure they are engaged in. If I seem a little bit excited about this, it's because I absolutely am, and I am very pleased that you gave me the job.

I do want to present a general assessment of the Citizens' Assembly. It may sound a little bit self-congratulatory, but it most certainly is not. In fact, it's the reverse. Rather, my overall assessment.... I'm going to read this, because I want to name a number of organizations and people that have helped make this work. It has been the best-coordinated teamwork I have seen in many things that I've been associated with.

My overall assessment reflects positively on the clarity and wisdom of the original Gibson report — it's truly a very good document — and those who over several years gave substance to the idea of a citizens' assembly on electoral reform. There are five or six key people that worked on this one. It reflects on the government for bringing forward such a socially innovative initiative and on the full Legislative Assembly, first, for making some very important and helpful changes and amendments to the Gibson recommendations — and I'll elaborate on that, if you wish, later — and, second, for giving unanimous approval to this in setting up the Citizens' Assembly. The whole matter of unanimous approval has been very important in our public meetings.

It's also to the special legislative committee, yourselves, who have contributed very helpful advice — I've been in touch with the Chair in between meetings — and affirmation of the assembly's independence. That, too, plays very well in the public meetings we've been having. The excellent services of Elections B.C. and the Ministry of Attorney General and the truly wonderful, talented and marvellously dedicated staff have come together to serve the objectives and the members of the assembly. The 11 people we have to-

gether working on the assembly are absolutely wonderful people, and I can't believe they're working so hard for what they're doing.

It reflects on a very supportive — surprisingly supportive; they're not here, so I can say it — media, which has taken the news of the assembly to all regions of the province. I'm going to elaborate on that a little bit more. Lastly and most importantly, it reflects on the enormous enthusiasm and goodwill of the citizens of British Columbia, all those who initially volunteered to serve on the assembly as well as those who ultimately were selected to be members of the assembly. In the truest sense these members are volunteers for British Columbia, and they feel that way.

My overall assessment, now that I've made it clear to whom the credit should go, is that the Citizens' Assembly on Electoral Reform is doing extraordinarily well. We've got a long way to go, and there will be critical issues. In fact, I don't think we're going to be doing our job unless there are some issues, and there will be some hot spots in the press and whatever. That's what's going to happen when the assembly is working. If I can continue to use the Gordon Gibson metaphor, the train left the station some time ago. It's on track. It's picking up a full complement of enthusiastic passengers, and it's gaining momentum and attention as it enters new democracy-building territory.

This is a little bit more of a formal report than I wanted to give, but it was very important for me to recognize all those who I think have contributed in very substantial ways to make this work. I'd like to now go into a kind of activity report. Of course, you can do whatever you like, but I'm happy to be stopped at any time for questions.

I did send you, Craig, a copy, but this is a slightly updated copy. I've got more copies here. I've got copies of my comments, a copy of the activity report and some other data that I can hand out later.

First of all, member selection. We have had 23 meetings to date. The last night was the one in Richmond, south Delta. We have 138 members so far. Two members have since withdrawn. One member, Max Malthus from Dawson Creek, passed away. He was 75 and got the flu and passed away. All three vacancies have since been filled. As you know, we can fill vacancies to January 9. After then, we don't fill vacancies.

We have three remaining meetings left. Your riding is one of the ones we're doing tonight, Ms. MacPhail. On Monday and Tuesday we finish the Vancouver ridings, so by Tuesday we'll have our full complement of 158 members.

[1045]

These meetings.... Jeff was at one of them; Ida was at one of them. The enthusiasm of members is really quite gratifying, but the disappointment is also there as well. You don't like to see that disappointment. As soon as I'm finished, if I'm chairing one of these meetings, I try to get to the door as soon as I can to thank people and to say: "It wouldn't work if you didn't come." You know, some people are really disappointed. Some people have got books with them and

everything else. Last night in Richmond we had a couple of people really, really disappointed. They wanted to know if they could volunteer. I said: "We're not taking volunteers."

In terms of age, I'd say we are generally in the middle-age group. We're not getting people over 71. We're getting fewer of those than are in the population. We're not getting the 18-to-24-year-old group, even though we've done a lot of special work to get these people. They're there. The youngest is 20 years old. But we're not getting them. Between the 25-and-39-year-old group, we're just about even for the population. Where we're overrepresented is 40 to 70. Later on I will give you the scrap, but we're overrepresented in 40 to 70.

The other thing about the members.... I have to test this empirically later, but I'm quite sure I'm right about this one. I talked to my colleagues about it. Their enthusiasm is not for studying electoral reform. Now, this is kind of "break this news" to Ken Carty, who is a professor of electoral studies and everything else, but it's not. What they're enthusiastic about is the opportunity to be engaged — to be engaged in some important kind of public policy process and have power, have impact. This could be any issue you like. My hunch is that if it were health care, they would be more excited. But they're not out there; they're not ideologues. I've only met maybe a couple of people who've got their mind made up that it's got to stay the same or it's got to change. That's been quite remarkable.

Any other questions you might want to ask about the people?

I. Chong: Being at the selection, I've seen you choose. All the men go in one hat; all the women's names go in another hat. You've given us the age of representative groups. Have there been other representative groups that you can share with us?

J. Blaney: Thank you, Ida — Ms. Chong. Sorry.

I. Chong: That's okay.

J. Blaney: I encourage all members of the assembly, by the way, to call me Jack — okay? And I call them by their first names right from the beginning.

J. MacPhail: You can do that here.

J. Blaney: Okay — especially since there's no one else present.

We are more white than the population as a whole, but we do have diversity. We do have Chinese Canadians. We have Indo-Canadians. We have people from the Middle Eastern countries. As I was mentioning to John early on, what is surprising to me in a way is that we're getting a lot of central and eastern European persons. It's not all western European. When I grew up in Richmond many years ago, I remember that we had a lot of central and eastern European neighbours. They're there.

There is a pretty good diversity. It's not the diversity we'd like of the Asian community, but they're there. Tonight — we'll see. There could be more again. Nick Loenen was there last night. He stands very much apart, by the way, and he is just very happy that it's on the way. As you know, he ran there many times. He said it's not surprising, because when you try to get the Chinese Canadian community involved, it's very difficult to get them involved.

As you know, these are randomly invited people, but it's self-selected. That is, they decide whether or not they're coming. The way we view it — and the Legislature and yourselves have done it — I think has allowed us to have a far more diverse group than we otherwise would have had. Had we gone with just the one member per riding, which was the original Gibson report — and there it was also by means of peer selection — my prediction is that we would have ended up with two-thirds male, all white — or pretty well all white.

We're getting much more diversity this way. Because you allowed me to make a chair's interpretation — choosing one man and one woman wasn't in the OIC; that's not in the legislation, by the way — we now have gender balance. It wouldn't be that way, by the way. Of the people who are saying yes, almost two-thirds are male and one-third are female. So we're getting the gender balance. The age balance is not bad. Ethnic balance and cultural balance are pretty good. It's not where you'd like it, but it's not bad.

[1050]

I. Chong: I know Joy had asked at the previous meeting about maybe a disabled person — that group as well — and if anyone volunteered to come out.

J. Blaney: One blind person.

I. Chong: Okay.

J. Blaney: Some people who are mobility-disabled.

I. Chong: They've come out.

J. Blaney: They've come out, but not as much as I would have thought. There was one person last night from Richmond who was clearly disabled in a number of ways. I'm not quite sure he did not have Parkinson's. He was not selected, but he was there, and he was ready to serve. We've had some disabled people.

I. Chong: Okay.

J. Blaney: Overall, it's quite encouraging. I think the two tweaks — well, they're more than tweaks — that happened in the amendment of the Gibson report made a huge difference in getting diversity in the group.

Member support services. Certainly, we're now preparing for them to come on January 9. We're putting together a fairly big manual for them, an orientation kind of manual about what's going to happen. We

are planning for their education — that is, the learning phase, which is the first two and a half months. Ken Carty and Campbell Sharman are very much involved in working on that and on drafting modules.

The media. The news media have already carried more than 150 news stories and items since September 1. Editorial comment, whether it's been the *Prince George Citizen* or the *Vancouver Sun*, has been absolutely positive. The *Vancouver Sun* intends to run a special Citizens' Assembly supplement on Saturday, November 29. In that supplement they're going to have pictures and little bios of all 158 assembly members.

I have indicated in meetings.... As you know, I've lived all my life in universities, and a university president or external relations person would kill for this kind of good publicity. I mean, it's just incredible — day after day. Now, there will be bad publicity and quotes when certain kinds of things happen, but it's been incredible. I think the kind of goodwill we've got there is extraordinary, and we just keep on building on it.

When we do have a couple of little wrinkles, we phone the press right away and tell them. You know, we had a little wrinkle with some letters that came late in Kelowna. We had a couple of members phone. We just phoned the press right away and told them: "Listen, we've got wrinkles. We've got some delayed mail in Kelowna." That relationship with the press is working out pretty well.

In addition to this, we've been on local radio, television, press interviews in Cranbrook and Prince George. Everywhere we go, Ken, Leo and I make sure we touch three or four press or radio stations or whatever, and at the end of each meeting we do a press release. That goes to everywhere in B.C. The local papers are carrying it pretty well. Dawson Creek and Fort St. John are carrying a story with a picture of their member, so that's pretty good.

We've got a website that's going to be revamped. It will be up in about two or three days. One thing we're doing there — and I think you wanted this — is that everything we prepare for the members is on the website. All the learning materials they get about electoral systems and parliamentary systems are going to be on the website so that any citizen or school — whatever — can pull this down and use it. We're also doing a special website for members so that they can communicate with themselves without having the public in on that one. That's important, I think, for them to do.

We put together a little research program working group — these are some academics and a couple of others — to look at the learning materials, our plans. It's basically to be an editor — a critique. We had one session with them just a couple of weeks ago, and it was enormously useful. Ken Carty and his team have gone back to the drawing board. You know, it's been very helpful. We've got professors from the University of Victoria, UBC and — what's that other university? — Simon Fraser University. That's been very helpful.

We're undertaking two kinds of evaluation. The first is a program of regular assessments and how ef-

fectively the materials are being presented to members, how well discussion groups are being facilitated and how member support services could be improved. We're doing this every weekend. We're doing a survey every weekend. We'll learn what's happened. We can then make modifications, and the following week, when people come back, we're going to report on what the evaluation told us and the kinds of changes we're going to make. We're going to involve a question period. At the beginning of each day there's a question period so members can ask whatever question they'd like and kind of get involved.

[1055]

The second research initiative, which I'm sure you wanted us to do, will explore the very success of the assembly itself. Is there a mechanism for effective deliberation and decision-making around issues of electoral reform or any other public policy issue? This should provide us with very important information as an evaluation of the Citizens' Assembly process when it has completed its work. The staff doing this is working in partnership with an outside expert. Canada's top expert in electoral system is André Blais at the University of Montreal. He's been out here several times, and he's working with Ken Carty and Campbell Sharmanto do an independent kind of assessment of how well this process is working.

Lastly, in terms of public awareness and engaging the public, we have worked hard with the schools. We have met with the social studies teachers. We have developed a special package of learning material kits for grade 11. Grade 11 has a fairly sizeable unit on the parliamentary system and electoral systems, so we have sample lesson plans for them. We have spoken to quite a number of teacher groups. I've spoken to the BCSTA about this in terms of what's going to be happening in the schools. A lot of individual school districts are asking us to help out.

The British Columbia Political Studies Association has the Citizens' Assembly as the theme of its upcoming conference — the whole conference. It's going to be entitled "Elections, Representation and Governance in the 21st Century," and it's all about the Citizens' Assembly. This will be held April 30 to May 1 at Kwantlen University College in Richmond, and Ken Carty and Campbell Sharman are key people who are going to be making those presentations.

Requests are coming from across Canada. I'll be in Montreal and Ottawa in February. In Ottawa I'm meeting with 20 senior public servants who want to know about what we're doing, and in Montreal with a number of academics who want to know what we're doing with the Citizens' Assembly. That's the kind of attention your invention is getting.

I'm very happy to have questions.

J. Les (Chair): Questions at this point?

Everybody's happy. All we want is more, more, more.

I. Chong: More good news.

J. Les (Chair): Did you want to carry on further, Jack, on the learning phase plans and that kind of thing? You've been there.

J. Blaney: Well, basically, I've been there. They're moving along pretty well. As I say, we had a group come in to kind of critique our learning phase plans and have gone back to the drawing board.

J. Les (Chair): Excellent. Ida, go ahead.

I. Chong: Can I just ask you about any questions, Jack, that have been raised by the members who have been selected, from those who were selected at the very earliest stages till now. Have any common questions arisen, any concerns — whether they be the timing and that? I know at the selection process you advise them. You go through a PowerPoint presentation. Now that some have been selected for a month or two, are any other concerns coming up that we need to be aware of? Just anything, I guess. I know some were selected two months ago or six weeks ago.

J. Les (Chair): Mid-October.

J. Blaney: October 15, I think, was the first one, at Fort St. John. Well, it sure seems like two months to me, unless it's been.... The point is that it's sure a good way to see the province.

One of the most common questions that come up is child care. We handled that, and there is a policy. The government's policy is not an enormously generous policy, but it's up to \$50 a day. I have talked to staff in the Attorney General's office, and there are special.... Exceptions can be made and everything else. For some people, day care is a 24-hour thing. It's not daytime. That question has come up several times.

Another common question is: "If I come down from Fort St. John for the weekend, can I bring my wife or husband and stay in a hotel?" That's come up quite often. But nothing really....

I. Chong: Nothing substantial.

J. Blaney: Nothing substantial. The selection meetings are.... First of all, they get a lot of that stuff in advance anyway. A lot of it is repeated at those meetings, and we repeat it at the meetings partly so that when they get up and declare that they're interested and eligible, it's in front of their peers. That's partly why we do that. I guess they've got most of the information.

We also tell them the orientation book is coming. This is going to have expense forms, the government's policy on paying things, and so I guess they're waiting for that. Other than that, there hasn't been anything.

I. Chong: Okay. Sure. Thanks.

J. MacPhail: How are you coping with the budget?

J. Blaney: My hunch is that we're going to be just fine with the budget. As we talked about the last time we met, to make the budget fit, we have eliminated the public reports that were going to be mailed by postal drop or whatever. My hunch is that we'll then be able to manage within the budget. We've saved some things. Some things are going to be a little bit more expensive.

One thing we've done is.... The original budget had hiring facilitators to go to these meetings. The staff is doing all that. We're not hiring facilitators, and I think we're probably going to do that right through to the public hearings. It's just kind of more hands-on.

Unless there are some pretty big surprises.... Leo Perra, who is the chief operations officer, is such a detail person. I mean, he's such a control freak. I guess this goes into *Hansard*, doesn't it? So I have a lot of confidence in him.

J. Les (Chair): Good little segue.

Any other questions? Rob, are you still with us?

R. Nijjar: Yes, I'm still with you.

J. Les (Chair): You're okay?

R. Nijjar: Yes, I'm okay.

J. Les (Chair): Okay. Is it at this point, Craig, that we should go in camera? We've got two items that I believe we need to discuss in camera. If I could have a motion that at this point we go in camera.

The committee continued in camera from 11 a.m. to 11:14 a.m.

[J. Les in the chair.]

J. Les (Chair): We're back on the record. We need to deal with the preparation of the committee's report. Craig, do you want to help us along on that?

[1115]

C. James: Sure. Just for the information of members of the committee, we have prepared a draft report which takes us to, I believe, somewhere in mid-October. Rather than distribute the report this morning, since we are meeting and the committee has heard an update from Dr. Blaney, we could update the report based on the outcome of this meeting and circulate it for members next week.

If it were advisable and if members so wished, they could meet toward the end of next week, and there would still be ample time for the report to be presented to the House. If not, we would have to go the alternate route of depositing a copy with the Clerk of the House and making it a public document at that point. The Chair would present the report to the House sometime in February.

J. Les (Chair): Your last selection meeting, Jack, is....

J. Blaney: Tuesday.

J. Les (Chair): Tuesday of next week. The House rises at the end of Thursday next week. In my own mind, I was thinking that Wednesday or Thursday might be a good opportunity to present the committee's report, incorporating the fact that the selection process was now complete.

J. Blaney: We could give you, then, a really up-to-date age profile and whatever.

J. Les (Chair): All of those things could go into it. It might be a little bit of a push on staff to get all of that in, but I think it would be a nice way to tie all the loose ends together.

J. MacPhail: What do you anticipate in terms of a time line for a response from the Attorney General?

J. Blaney: Well, I haven't had one yet.

J. Les (Chair): We'll need to play that by ear a little bit, but we'll be communicating....

J. Blaney: I understand he does have it under.... He's looking at it.

J. Les (Chair): So do we actually need a formal meeting, Craig, or if I was...? We do need a formal meeting to endorse the report before it gets presented to the House.

C. James: We can do that Thursday morning.

J. Les (Chair): Thursday morning next week or.... Yeah. Why don't we...?

J. MacPhail: Craig, don't we have LAMC?

C. James: Nine to ten.

J. MacPhail: Yeah.

J. Les (Chair): Getting up early in the morning stuff — right?

J. MacPhail: Anyway, you don't have to worry about me at all.

J. Les (Chair): Sure. We'll make it work Thursday morning next week.

J. Blaney: I do have copies of my activity report — an up-to-date one — and my comments about who takes credit for this. I can leave them here.

A Voice: Great. Thank you.

J. Les (Chair): Excellent.

Is that a plan, then — that staff prepare a report that we meet to consider next Thursday morning at a time to be arranged? That works for you too, I'm presuming. Do you even need to be there for that Thursday morning?

J. Blaney: I don't know.

J. Bray (Deputy Chair): It's our report. I'm not sure if he'd actually be able to....

J. Blaney: What we will do, I think....

J. Les (Chair): You'll be collaborating with Craig.

J. Blaney: With Craig. So what we will do first thing Thursday morning is send an updated demographic profile and any other news updating the activity part.

J. Les (Chair): Yeah.

J. Blaney: My hunch is that there won't be much more news, other than the total numbers and the age profile.

J. Les (Chair): That's right — Wednesday morning if you could, so that Josie actually has a date.

J. Blaney: I'm sorry. Wednesday morning is what I meant.

J. Schofield: Wednesday morning.

J. Blaney: You'll get it Wednesday morning.

J. Schofield: When would the members like this?

J. Les (Chair): The draft? Sometime Wednesday, obviously.

J. Schofield: Midnight? [Laughter.]

J. Les (Chair): A bit too much pressure on you, Josie? So we could actually spend a bit of time reading and reviewing it before the Thursday morning meeting. Then, hopefully, we'll be able to present it in the House on Thursday afternoon next week.

If that's agreeable, do we need a motion to do that, Craig?

C. James: No.

J. Les (Chair): That's fine. Great. Anything else we need to do?

C. James: Yeah. I'm wondering, since we have a motion....

J. Les (Chair): A motion to endorse the in-camera recommendations?

Interjection.

J. Les (Chair): The motion would read: endorse the work of the Citizens' Assembly, including recommendations made to the committee respecting the composition of the Citizens' Assembly — or words to that effect.

Motion approved.

The committee adjourned at 11:19 a.m.