



Speaker's Forum on the Role of Members: CURRENT CHALLENGES

A report prepared by Martha Dow, Ph.D.

In Coordination with the Office of the Speaker,
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Foreword by the Honourable Darryl Plecas, Speaker of the Legislative Assembly

As we approach the 150th anniversary in 2021 of British Columbia's entry into the Canadian federation, it is timely to explore how to support Members of the Legislative Assembly in carrying out their important roles and responsibilities in a rapidly changing society.

The Speaker of the Legislative Assembly serves all Members in presiding over parliamentary proceedings and is responsible, along with the Legislative Assembly Management Committee, for the Assembly's day to day administration. The Speaker also represents the Assembly in its relations with the Crown, the provincial government and other bodies, and must protect the fundamental operation of parliamentary democracy. I believe that the Speaker must also serve as a trustee of the institution, ensuring it represents the best values of public accessibility, democracy, openness, and public service.

I launched the Speaker's Forum on the Role of Members in December 2017 to engage with a variety of representative groups from different backgrounds to provide input on ways to support the work of Members. Since then, the Forum has featured a series of roundtable discussions on the roles of Members with academics and political scientists, media, Legislative Assembly interns, educators, youth, former Members, and representatives of Indigenous communities. The themes and issues raised in these sessions are summarized in this report. These findings will inform consultations on potential areas for change, reforms and improvement in the year ahead.

All constituents expect their elected representatives and the Legislative Assembly's administration to function with honesty and the highest ethical standards. Since becoming Speaker, I have made ethics and values a priority in the governance of this core institution. As specific Speaker's Forum strategies emerge during Year Two of this undertaking, I am confident that these core values will continue to guide our next steps in support of all Members. I look forward to continuing the work of the Speaker's Forum to address and fulfill the expectations, demands and institutional aspirations of all British Columbians.

I would like to thank the many participants in the Year One Forum roundtables for their energy, enthusiasm and ideas. I am also grateful to Dr. Martha Dow, Department Head, Social, Cultural and Media Studies, University of the Fraser Valley, for serving as the Academic Facilitator of the Speaker's Forum. I am also especially grateful to Kate Ryan-Lloyd, Acting Clerk of the Legislative Assembly, and Artour Sogomonian, Procedural Clerk, for their help in supporting the Forum and making its success a reality.

Everyone with ideas and comments on this report, or the suggestions explored within it, are encouraged to share their thoughts with us via email SpeakersForum@leg.bc.ca.

Sincerely,

Honourable Darryl Plecas
Speaker of the Legislative Assembly

Introduction

The Speaker's Forum on the Role of Members was established by the Honourable Darryl Plecas, Speaker of the Legislative Assembly, in December 2017. The purpose of the Forum is to bring together a variety of participants with different backgrounds to provide input on how the role of Members of the Legislative Assembly (MLAs) can be enhanced in British Columbia's parliamentary system. The Forum adopts a non-partisan framework to explore how political culture and dynamics may affect Members' parliamentary responsibilities and their representative role and how Members may empower themselves to enhance their effectiveness as representatives of their communities. Discussions on how to provide MLAs with a strengthened voice to represent their constituents and thereby enhance public perception of the role of parliamentarians, and consequently encourage robust and diverse political engagement of citizens, supported the central objectives of the initiative.

British Columbia is one of many jurisdictions around the world that sees more meaningful political engagement as central to parliamentary reform and an engaged citizenry. From a national perspective, Tellier (2014) notes that "several Canadian legislatures have started to look for new ways to increase the role of the legislative branch and bring more relevance to the work of parliamentarians and parliamentary institutions" (pp. 192-193). The Speakers' Forum is motivated in part by these conversations in various jurisdictions around the globe and the opportunity for British Columbia to be a leader in these types of reform efforts. This report will present key themes raised by Forum participants in conjunction with related literature in an effort to illuminate critical challenges and set the stage for the development of strategies for change in Year Two of the project.

Background

Thomas and White (2015) assert that “[l]egislatures are the central democratic institutions in Canada’s provinces and territories. Like other Canadian political institutions, however, legislatures have fallen into disrepute, in part because they are widely perceived as unresponsive and unrepresentative” (p. 363). One of the areas that receives a great deal of attention, in any discussion of improving public engagement, is voter turnout and particularly youth voting patterns. Elections B.C. data indicates that there has been a general downward trend in voter turnout with 70.5% of eligible voters voting in 1983 and 55.3% voting in 2013 with a bump in that trend in 2017 (61.2% turnout). Among 18-24 and 25-34 year olds, only 47.9% and 39.8% of registered voters voted in 2013, with an increase in 2017 with 56.2% and 46.4% of young people voting.¹

In an effort to understand voter turnout in the 1980s and 90s, Adsett (2003) asserts that “[w]ith the emergence of neo-liberalism, the Canadian state has reduced if not retracted its support to Canadian youth in their transition to adulthood (e.g., post-secondary education, unemployment insurance and housing) in its dismantling of the welfare state. In addition, it has given a low priority to the types of programmes and initiatives that have traditionally concerned Western youth (e.g., equality, and individual and human rights)” (pp. 261-262). Not surprisingly, levels of interest in politics is more significantly connected to voting for younger people than older individuals.²

Importantly, there are clear and consistent similarities among calls for reform at the provincial and federal levels as “concerns about the impacts of disciplined political parties and dominant leaders on Canada’s House of Commons and its public credibility have been a staple of Canadian parliamentary reform discourses for close to half a century” (Stilborn, 2017, p. 35). In an effort to understand structural resistance to change “the concept of ‘path dependence’ has been used to explain how established patterns of political mobilization, institutional rules of behaviour, and ways of thinking become self-reinforcing and difficult to reverse” (Crawford, 2011/12, p. 79). There are important structural realities and relational dynamics that need to be understood and engaged with in any change efforts.

¹ Provincial General Election: Report of the Chief Electoral Officer. (2017). <https://elections.bc.ca/docs/rpt/2017-General-Election-Report.pdf>.

² Statistics Canada. (2015). Civic engagement and political participation in Canada (Catalogue no. 89-652-X2015006. Retrieved from <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/89-652-x/89-652-x2015006-eng.htm>.

The Strategy: Speaker's Forum

This first phase of the Speaker's Forum provided an opportunity for participants to discuss and identify, from their perspective, the challenges that Members and the public face in the current political environment. In its first year, the Forum featured a series of roundtable discussions held with political scientists, members of the media, Legislative Assembly interns, educators, youth, former MLAs, and Indigenous participants. Key stakeholder groups and potential participants were identified in collaboration with the Speaker and the Office of the Clerk. These stakeholder groups were selected as key informants in the discussion of parliamentary engagement and participants were selected in an effort to gather a range of perspectives. The sessions were recorded by Hansard staff in order to produce internal transcripts in order to prepare key themes and ideas to be shared online and employed in the thematic discussion captured in this report.³ Themes and findings emerging during each session shaped discussion topics in subsequent sessions.⁴

Importantly, the Forum feedback will inform the framing of Year Two discussions with a wide variety of new and returning participants and groups as these discussions focus on possible opportunities, and more specifically, strategies for change. Year Three will focus on implementation and monitoring of selected strategies for change developed in Year Two, with subsequent years structured to assess the strategies employed to support a best practices blueprint moving forward.

³ Only challenges were included in this Year One report. Year One feedback in relation to opportunities and strategies for change will be incorporated in the fuller report that will be prepared at the end of Year Two consultations.

⁴ Roundtable discussion did not focus on topics of electoral reform, alternate electoral systems, or partisan issues of any kind.

The Consultation: Framing Key Issues Raised

All of the sessions explored Members' roles as they are shaped by factors associated with a variety of topics, including: representative and responsible government; constituency consultation and input; caucus solidarity and party discipline, agenda-setting and policy development; public perceptions; media representations; civic education; parliamentary structures and processes; and, organizational culture. The feedback from these sessions informed the thematic discussions below.

Private Members have a less prominent role in the Legislative Assembly and have limited opportunities to speak on behalf of their constituents due to caucus and party politics and associated party discipline.⁵ More opportunities that allow Members to engage meaningfully with the needs of their constituents in the Legislative Assembly are needed. Private Members' participation through bill development and Members' Statements is seen by many participants to be marginalized to an extent that is concerning.⁶ As noted by Bob Rae, former Premier of Ontario, "political discourse has increasingly become the rote repetition of the same phrases over and over again, people talking past each other, with canned answers responding to canned questions. It becomes unreal, stilted, and a substitution for thought, spontaneity and general debate" (p. xvi).

The particular expertise held by elected Members is not utilized, or only partially utilized, resulting in potentially less effective parliamentary discourse, which can then impact the governance contributing to the disillusionment of the public.⁷ Even the historic notation of *back bencher*, though Private Member is the current term, further marginalizes certain Members of the Legislative Assembly in the eyes of the public and in practice.⁸ A reform-focused report prepared by the Library of Parliament (2002) highlighted that "Parliamentarians do not feel their work as legislators has a significant impact on public policy decisions in Canada. By the time issues and ideas are brought to either chamber, positions have by and large been set, partisan lines drawn, and the outcomes determined. What is more, Parliamentarians feel they have little, if anything, to show for those occasions when they come together on issues, be it a committee recommendation or motion passed in the chamber. Put simply, decisions are made elsewhere" (p. 7).

The System: Structure, Complexities, Traditions

All of the forums acknowledged, in one way or another, that the most important institutional and cultural challenges within the system are enmeshed in complex ways that need to be disentangled, articulated and understood before any change opportunities can be fully considered and ultimately realized.⁹ These institutional and cultural norms, that are so important in this analysis, are embedded within the adversarial system and potentially present challenges to a representative and responsible government.¹⁰ More

⁵ Former MLA Roundtable, September 21, 2018 – Victoria, British Columbia.

⁶ Youth Roundtable, April 21, 2018 – Victoria, British Columbia.

⁷ Political Scientist Roundtable, February 9 and 10, 2018 – Vancouver, British Columbia.

⁸ Former MLA Roundtable, September 21, 2018 – Victoria, British Columbia.

⁹ Political Scientist Roundtable, February 9 and 10, 2018 – Vancouver, British Columbia.

¹⁰ Political Scientist Roundtable, February 9 and 10, 2018 – Vancouver, British Columbia.

specifically, there are challenges that result from the structures and processes of the government being shaped through the centralization of power in the Office of the Premier.¹¹ There are also opportunities to integrate Indigenous ways of knowing and governing in relation to political, legal, environmental, familial and other spheres of influence in an effort to create “ethical spaces” conducive to collaborative and respectful governance strategies.¹²

In 2015, in its parliamentary reform efforts, the federal government committed to “make free votes in the House ‘standard practice,’ enabling Liberal backbenchers to give ‘Canadians a stronger voice,’ and ... to strengthen parliamentary committees (Liberal Party of Canada, 2015, p. 30)” highlighting the need to enhance the role of all Members of any parliament (Stillborn, 2017, p. 36).

These types of reform proposals are supported by the key issues raised in the roundtables, including the decentralization of agenda-setting to support more inclusive and timely policy debates and discussions informed through greater development and utilization of policy sector expertise within government and opposition parties, and an enhanced model to support amendments to bills.¹³

In an interesting take on informed debate, tenure and leadership, an Indigenous participant noted that, “one of the words for our people is ‘Many Chiefs’ because they came across us, and they couldn’t quite figure out how the system worked because the best person for the job stepped in and was Chief at that point in time.”

Another example of an accessible site of change would be the use of daily and weekly Members’ Statements as it is difficult to assess their effectiveness in raising constituency issues in their present form. More opportunities may help to bridge constituency representation with broader party policy and agenda-setting paying attention to the likely disconnect between constituents’ expectations of representation and the realities of representation.¹⁴ So many of these issues are exacerbated by a lack of diverse representation in legislatures around the world, and that reality results in real and perceived representation issues and significant opportunities for change.^{15,16}

Question Period

The purpose of Question Period is to provide the legislative branch an accountability mechanism to exercise oversight of the powerful executive branch. In practice, Question Period is largely for the Opposition and yet, at both the provincial and federal level, it is not designed in a manner that supports meaningful discussion and debate about substantive issues impacting British Columbians and more broadly, Canadian citizens.¹⁷ There is little debate that the stated purpose of any government’s Question Period is to encourage transparency and public accountability of the Executive Council and individual Ministers. However, Ulrich’s (2011) discussion of the federal government is relevant to the provincial level noting that it “seems at once

¹¹ Media Roundtable, March 9, 2018 – Victoria, British Columbia.

¹² Indigenous Group Roundtable, December 8, 2018 – Victoria, British Columbia.

¹³ Political Scientist Roundtable, February 9 and 10, 2018 – Vancouver, British Columbia.

¹⁴ Political Scientist Roundtable, February 9 and 10, 2018 – Vancouver, British Columbia.

¹⁵ Political Scientist Roundtable, February 9 and 10, 2018 – Vancouver, British Columbia.

¹⁶ Youth Roundtable, April 21, 2018 – Victoria, British Columbia.

¹⁷ Media Roundtable, March 9, 2018 - Victoria, British Columbia.

to be the best known and the most misunderstood activity of the federal government Yet of all the work that happens in the House of Commons, Question Period ranks least in importance in terms of actually accomplishing anything” (Ulrich, 2011, p. 1). Generally, the key criticisms are “that Question Period lacks depth and meaningful discussion, that its participants lack decorum, and that the representation of that debate lacks enlightened reflection” (p. 2). Instead, some participants emphasized a primary role of Question Period as providing fodder for the media.

Importantly, it is argued that Question Period contributes to the disillusionment of youth as they increasingly see politics as partisan, and at times personal and hostile, when the system was purportedly designed to be elected officials representing their constituents in and to government.¹⁸ Blidook and Kerby (2011) noted that at the federal level too often “parties work hard to organize questions to suit their own purposes, with questions often being chosen because of their ability to inflict damage upon the government rather than present a regionally or locally salient issue” (p. 337). At a provincial level, the substantive vacuum that can be Question Period is perhaps best summarized by the phrase “It’s Question Period, not Answer Period” (Ulrich, 2011, p. 6).

In addition to concerns about the substantive value of Question Period as it is presently constituted, there needs to be more attention paid to decorum in the legislature as heckling and even word choices and tone contribute to the alienation of “outsiders”. These outsider groups, including the general and specialized publics, see these behaviours as out of step with the rest of society and more specifically workplace expectations.¹⁹ For some, Question Period is simply a performance and the posturing has the consequence of acting as a deterrent to women and other under-represented voices who find these tactics unappealing and unproductive.^{20,21}

In discussing the federal system, Ulrich (2011) asserts that “[i]n fact, the idea of Question Period as theatre touches on all major areas of current criticism – that the dialogue is simply scripted and lacks depth and meaning, that the ‘actors’ are amateurish and lack poise, and that the ‘critics,’ or media, do a poor job representing the spectacle to the public” (p. 5). Similarly, “legislative politics in Canadian provinces are almost entirely party politics, marked by a primal and relentlessly adversarial division between the government and the opposition, defined essentially in terms of parties” (Thomas and White, 2015, pp. 365-366).

Not surprisingly, some stakeholders argued heckling is an integral part of the adversarial system and supports greater accountability; while also conceding that there can be a public perception that this behavior is at the very least unbecoming contributing to further disillusionment with politicians and the efficacy of the Legislative Assembly.²² A more salient thread is that it is increasingly difficult to deal with the disconnect between behavioural and cultural norms in the House and broader society and particularly as schools are dealing with bullying, harassment, marginalization, and inappropriate comments and

¹⁸ Youth Roundtable, April 21, 2018 – Victoria, British Columbia.

¹⁹ Legislative Intern Roundtable, June 27, 2018 – Victoria, British Columbia.

²⁰ Former MLA Roundtable, September 21, 2018 – Victoria, British Columbia.

²¹ Political Scientist Roundtable, February 9 and 10, 2018 – Vancouver, British Columbia.

²² Media Roundtable, March 9, 2018 – Victoria, British Columbia.

behaviours.^{23,24,25} It is important to look to the consensus style governments of Nunavut and the Northwest Territories “which rejects majoritarian procedures such as voting as well as unfettered control by strong leaders” (Thomas and White, 2015, p. 369).

Embedded in this critique is the observation that more critical discussion of confidentiality, transparency, and methods of communication that support debate and collaborative dialogue need to be supported.²⁶

These potentially more meaningful principles are less likely to be realized in the current context where “the media attention and public interest in Question Period affects issue saliency” (Ulrich, 2011, p. 4).

Ulrich (2011) argues that “the problems facing Question Period reflect institutional flaws: firstly, the dysfunctional relationship between government and the media; and secondly, the problem of public engagement with politics and public demand for quality information and analysis” (pp. 10-11). Some participants reflected on the challenges inherent in the media and government relationship as aggravating factors.²⁷ Efforts to challenge the current form and function of Question Period need to examine and remediate these aspects of systemic engagement.

The adversarial system is dehumanizing as it is too often accusatory, hostile and unforgiving. Traditional Indigenous models of governance have the potential to be more inclusive and accessible in part because they are characterized by grace, natural forms of leadership, and consensus-decision-making.²⁸ In thinking about the adversarial and too often aggressive nature of the system, a participant noted that “any system that doesn’t foster those values of humility, truth, bravery, love and respect is ... violating the human gifts we’ve been given.”²⁹

Committee Structure and Role

In relation to the work of MLAs, there are impediments embedded in parliamentary committee structures and processes, including role definition, composition, power to initiate inquiries, reporting out processes, and other transparency issues.³⁰ Tellier (2014) notes that “[t]he underlying assumption [of reform] is that legislators and legislative institutions would gain more relevance if they were more actively involved in the design of public policy and/or the decision-making process. This interest in parliamentary reforms is by no means exclusive to Canada and complaints about the weakening of democratic institutions are also heard in other countries, where several new initiatives have already been adopted to increase the role of legislative committees” (p. 193). Thomas and White (2015) note that “[c]ommittees have several advantages over house proceedings ... They have the time to deal in depth with particular issues and policy questions; their small size allows for full participation by all members; they can operate in a less adversarial, less politically charged

²³ Educator Roundtable, May 12, 2018 – Vancouver, British Columbia.

²⁴ Youth Roundtable, April 21, 2018 – Victoria, British Columbia.

²⁵ Legislative Intern Roundtable, June 27, 2018 – Victoria, British Columbia.

²⁶ Former MLA Roundtable, September 21, 2018 – Victoria, British Columbia.

²⁷ Political Scientist Roundtable, February 9 and 10, 2018 – Vancouver, British Columbia.

²⁸ Indigenous Group Roundtable, December 8, 2018 – Victoria British Columbia.

²⁹ Indigenous Group Roundtable, December 8, 2018 – Victoria British Columbia.

³⁰ Political Scientist Roundtable, February 9 and 10, 2018 – Vancouver, British Columbia.

format; they can summon expert witnesses and public servants to discuss policy matters; and they can call on professional staff support to guide and supplement their work in ways that are not possible in the chamber” (p. 385).

In an examination of changes to the committee role at the federal level, Stilborn (2014) concludes that “the modern Canadian House of Commons committee system has created significant new opportunities for parliamentarians to influence the government, and studies by parliamentary committees must now be recognized as a distinct form of parliamentary influence on governments. However, the influence of committee studies is much more modest than might be suggested by the dramatically increased volume of reports, recommendations and responses being generated since the mid-1980s” (p. 355). In discussing provincial legislatures, Thomas and White (2015) note that “[c]ommittees can also play a crucial accountability role, Question Period may be explosive and dramatic, but committees can scrutinize political decisions and administrative processes in far more detail and in a less adversarial manner than is possible in the politically supercharged atmosphere of the chamber. In addition, committees, unlike the house, can and do call appointed officials before them and thus contribute to holding the bureaucracy accountable” (p. 389).

While expanded committee roles and powers was an emphasis across a number of forums, the federal experience would support cautious enthusiasm for the possible impact of these types of changes. The committee role, at both the federal and provincial levels of government is still restricted by authority structures and caucus dynamics and the increased prominence of consequential committee work in agenda-setting and policy development will not be realized without shifts in these realities.

Caucus Dynamics

As highlighted above, Question Period is not conducive to meaningful dialogue and debate on substantive issues and Private Members’ relationship to the Executive Council is often less productive than the public and Members assume it should be.^{31,32} Additionally, there are pressures associated with caucus solidarity, party politics and the associated disciplinary motivations and strategies associated with these dynamics. It has been argued that “Canadian legislatures ... are characterized by a culture of excessively stringent party discipline” (Thomas and White, 2015, p. 365). Central to shaping these structures and processes is understanding the nature of the First Minister’s leadership model in relation to the role of the Executive Council, all Members, party discipline, voting, and caucus and party activities.³³ The current balance of power favours the bureaucracy supporting the leader which further marginalizes the voices of MLAs.³⁴ Party politics act to stifle meaningful public consultation and debate through formal structures (e.g. committees chaired by Members of parties) and informally through party discipline.³⁵

³¹ Political Scientist Roundtable, February 9 and 10, 2018 – Vancouver, British Columbia.

³² Legislative Intern Roundtable, June 27, 2018 – Victoria, British Columbia.

³³ Political Scientist Roundtable, February 9 and 10, 2018 – Vancouver, British Columbia.

³⁴ Former MLA Roundtable, September 21, 2018 – Victoria, British Columbia.

³⁵ Media Roundtable, March 9, 2018 – Victoria, British Columbia.

Party discipline is an impediment to collaborative and creative approaches to policy development across party lines irrespective of the parties and without reference to the issue.³⁶ However, “the Westminster system need not entail the suffocating party discipline that characterizes Canadian provincial legislatures. Much scope exists within the current system for enhancing the contributions that individual members and the opposition can make to the governing process” (Thomas & White, 2015, p. 394).

Associated with this concern is a lack of emphasis on background research undertaken to support policy discussions and inadequate representativeness and diversity of experiences and views characterizing those conducting the research.³⁷ In its discussion of descriptions of MP party loyalty, the Samara Centre for Democracy (2018) noted that “[b]ecause of these strongly held norms about the importance of teamwork and championing the party values, caucus Members can powerfully police each other, and discipline each other without prompting from the leadership” (p. 31).

Understanding the System: Insider/Outsider Status

At its most basic level, a representative and responsible government refers to a collection of officials who have been elected to represent the interests of the voters and be responsible to the legislature for their actions and decisions. However, “[r]epresentation in legislatures is multidimensional. It can mean the extent to which the elected members are socially representative, that is, how faithfully legislators’ social characteristics – ethnicity, sex, age, and the like – mirror those of the population. It can also refer to the legislature’s capacity to bring to the attention of government decision-makers the range of ideas and preferences held by the public. Finally, it may mean members’ interventions on behalf of individual constituents or groups of constituents in their dealings with government” (p. 370).

Distinguishing between a representative legislature and responsible government in structure and process is essential and yet too often it is not effectively articulated resulting in stakeholders often not understanding the differences and intricacies of the representative, the holding to account, and the law-making functions of government.³⁸ Despite being written over 25 years ago, this comment echoes a thread through many of the forums: “As a representative institution the B.C. legislature is far from perfect. It is difficult to be more specific than this since there is disagreement about how ‘representational excellence’ should be conceptualized and measured. Nonetheless, three indisputable points can be made about the B.C. legislature’s shortcomings in this regard. First, as in other legislatures styled on the British model, the institution of party discipline significantly limits members’ freedom to speak publicly and to vote on behalf of their constituencies. Second, the legislature’s membership does not accurately reflect the make-up of B.C.’s adult population. Third, members represent constituencies of widely divergent population sizes. In a sense, voters in small ridings have a stronger voice than those in large ones” (Morley et al., 1983, pp. 14-15).

It is critical that the complexities of the parliamentary system and associated procedures be explained to the public and *insiders*. New Members often begin their first term with minimal knowledge regarding their role

³⁶ Media Roundtable, March 9, 2018 – Victoria, British Columbia.

³⁷ Legislative Intern Roundtable, June 27, 2018 – Victoria, British Columbia.

³⁸ Political Scientist Roundtable, February 9 and 10, 2018 – Vancouver, British Columbia.

and relationship to Assembly and government processes, including the basics of what it means to be part of a representative and responsible government.³⁹ There is a need to provide timely and accessible information to the public and other stakeholders. These informational opportunities should be event or issue specific to enable increased awareness, potential advocacy, and enhanced participation. Additionally, these efforts should frame issues within a broader and continual public education campaign.⁴⁰

The K-12 and postsecondary education systems are key sites for this type of education; however, some participants argued that the education system does not do a particularly good job of translating education about civics and politics to engagement in civic and public life.⁴¹ Some of these concerns revolve around insufficient opportunities in the K-12 system to provide effective educational opportunities about politics and governance emphasizing critical thinking, evidence-informed problem-solving, and media literacy.^{42,43} ⁴⁴ Efforts to change this reality may ultimately have an impact on making politics relevant in the everyday lives of citizens.⁴⁵ In addition to, or perhaps in partnership with, these traditional venues there need to be educational avenues for the general public developed in conjunction with associated opportunities for enhanced engagement based on their improved understanding of the mechanics of government and strategies for change on particular issues.⁴⁶

Public Engagement: Shaping Perceptions and Participation

The general public, no matter the jurisdiction, often do not fully understand the structure, and importance of provincial legislatures and generally hold negative and relatively uninformed and oversimplified views of politicians.^{47,48} Connected to these challenges is a lack of understanding of the roles and responsibilities of the various levels of government. Associated with this lack of understanding there is a much greater interest in federal politics than provincial and municipal politics despite the everyday connection that British Columbians have to the issues that are the responsibility of the provincial government.⁴⁹ Irrespective of the level of government a significant proportion of the general public historically and currently hold negative and/or distrustful perceptions of politicians and government institutions.

Media and the Representation of Government

The media is a critical filter and conduit in developing the type of political understanding among the general public and specialized audiences⁵⁰ discussed above. Arguably, “the media watches intensely, ready to pass

³⁹ Former MLA Roundtable, September 21, 2018 – Victoria, British Columbia.

⁴⁰ Media Roundtable, March 9, 2018 – Victoria, British Columbia.

⁴¹ Youth Roundtable, April 21, 2018 – Victoria, British Columbia.

⁴² Youth Roundtable, April 21, 2018 – Victoria, British Columbia.

⁴³ Educator Roundtable, May 12, 2018 – Vancouver, British Columbia.

⁴⁴ Intern Roundtable, June 27, 2018 – Victoria, British Columbia.

⁴⁵ Intern Roundtable, June 27, 2018 – Victoria, British Columbia.

⁴⁶ Former MLA Roundtable, September 21, 2018 – Victoria, British Columbia.

⁴⁷ Youth Roundtable, April 21, 2018 – Victoria, British Columbia.

⁴⁸ Political Scientist Roundtable, February 9 and 10, 2018 – Vancouver, British Columbia.

⁴⁹ Media Roundtable, March 9, 2018 – Victoria, British Columbia.

⁵⁰ Political Scientist Roundtable, February 9 and 10, 2018 – Vancouver, British Columbia.

on the interesting and controversial tidbits via political talk shows, the evening news or the next morning's paper, acting as 'the arbiter of accountability'" (Ulrich, 2011, p. 3). This reality means that there is tremendous potential to shift the landscape of public engagement through the media.⁵¹

While the media plays a critical role in how the public understands and consequently engages with government structures, there have been enormous shifts in how people consume information and develop knowledge based on that consumption. Social media and mainstream media play a key role in potentially educating and increasing access to the public; however, both also serve to further alienate young people as they can exacerbate the perception of partisanship.⁵² British Columbians, by their diversity, represent different challenges to engagement that need to be explored and then responded to in order to facilitate meaningful access to provincial politics.⁵³

Building on the previous discussion of Question Period, participants highlighted a disconnect between what youth are learning about the role of good government and what is being represented in the media which is often characterized by reactionary, insincere and vitriolic exchanges.^{54,55} Highlighting the significance of the media's role, "[t]he press gallery's importance stems from its role as a linchpin between legislative events and the political climate It is the forces embodied in this climate that ultimately shape public policy and control governments. The legislature has more to do with politics than with government, but the two realms are tightly intertwined" (Morley et al., 1983, p. 44).

The media has an ability to contribute to problems in public perception and indeed a culture of partisan politics or mitigate these perceptions and dynamics and promote more meaningful public engagement with the processes and substantive issues.⁵⁶

Understanding the System: The Role of Civic Education

An example of the requirement of improved understanding is that activists and the general public see petition involvement as political agency without understanding limitations within the procedural framework associated with petitions, most notably that the majority of petitions don't comply with procedural requirements. The embedded tension is that as the public develops a better understanding of these procedural realities there will likely be even further public disillusionment.⁵⁷

Civic education is viewed by many as an important response to real and perceived aspects of a disinterested and disillusioned public (Chareka and Sears, 2006). The importance of connecting students, parents and members of the general public to civic engagement in sustainable ways and the development of strategic partnerships among school districts and local MLAs within a provincial framework are building blocks for

⁵¹ Political Scientist Roundtable, February 9 and 10, 2018 – Vancouver, British Columbia.

⁵² Legislative Intern Roundtable, June 27, 2018 – Victoria, British Columbia.

⁵³ Media Roundtable, March 9, 2018 – Victoria, British Columbia.

⁵⁴ Youth Roundtable, April 21, 2018 – Victoria, British Columbia.

⁵⁵ Educator Roundtable, May 12, 2018 – Vancouver, British Columbia.

⁵⁶ Former MLA Roundtable, September 21, 2018 – Victoria, British Columbia.

⁵⁷ Media Roundtable, March 9, 2018 – Victoria, British Columbia.

change.⁵⁸ However, Chareka and Sears (2006) argue that “it seems clear to us that programs focused on either teaching the technical aspects of voting or, indeed, the reasons why voting is important in a democracy may be missing the mark because the youth we interviewed had clear and well-developed understandings of both those areas. Voter education, to be effective, will have to be several steps removed from voting itself and deal with young people’s conceptions of politicians as ineffective and dishonest, and political parties as all the same” (p. 534). These types of conclusions assert the need for evidence-based approaches to civic education that acknowledge the diversity of needs, experiences, and identities that shape public understanding.

It is difficult to understand how the Legislative Assembly works without having insider status, yet it is that understanding that will strengthen the public’s connections with Assembly activities.⁵⁹ Interestingly, an aspect of insider status has to do with actual physical plant insider status. The physical construct of the Parliament Buildings themselves are not as open or welcoming as they could be resulting in missed opportunities to connect British Columbians to their political history and the current issues related to their everyday lives.⁶⁰ As noted by Morley et al. (1983), “the entire precinct, and not just the chamber, is the central stage in the province’s democratic system. Events taking place in the halls and offices adjoining the chamber have as much or more impact on the course of political events as has debate in the chamber. And the legislative buildings as a whole are a physical embodiment of the governmental structure which helps to legitimate government policies and opposition criticism alike” (pp. 13-14).

The general public and many politicians do not have a good understanding of their own histories, the history of Canada, and certainly not Indigenous histories.⁶¹ More specifically, the media is challenged by some aspects of the physical plant and “rules of engagement” that make it more difficult to hold MLAs to account and/or simply get clarity on issues raised in the House.⁶²

The General Public: Shaping Interest and Engagement

The public feels disconnected from decision-making and disillusioned by the prepared message orientation of politicians’ efforts to engage with constituents and the broader community. For many, there is a perception that there is a lack of effectiveness and low accountability in government culminating in a sense of distrust and dissatisfaction.⁶³ Quintelier’s (2007) work supports this thread in the Forum discussions noting that “[p]olitical indifference is not specific to young people, however, as contemporary research points to similar attitudes among adults: they have little political knowledge, are barely interested, are not engaged, lack of confidence, trust and efficacy, and so on. Ultimately, it seems that young people and adults are not so different in their political attitudes, with the exception that young people have fewer opportunities to participate politically” (p. 177).

⁵⁸ Educator Roundtable, May 12, 2018 – Vancouver, British Columbia.

⁵⁹ Intern Roundtable, June 27, 2018 – Victoria, British Columbia.

⁶⁰ Media Roundtable, March 9, 2018 – Victoria, British Columbia.

⁶¹ Indigenous Group Roundtable, December 8, 2018 – Victoria, British Columbia.

⁶² Media Roundtable, March 9, 2018 – Victoria, British Columbia.

⁶³ Political Scientist Roundtable, February 9 and 10, 2018 – Vancouver, British Columbia.

There is a perceived disconnect between who Members are as they are elected, re-elected and engage in their communities and how they behave in the Legislative Assembly. The public's disillusionment and disengagement is further fueled by the perception that politicians are working within party defined boxes characterized by a lack of transparency, very few "work days", and seemingly ill-advised policy decisions.⁶⁴

Voter turnout, party membership and party member activism are all important indicators of public engagement. In relation to these activities, Cross and Young (2008a) note that "youth members are crucial to activism rates in parties. We find that youth are more active than older members of the parties, and that, even among older cohorts of members, there is suggestive evidence that those who join the party before age 26 are more active than those of the same age who join later in life. This coupled with the finding that length of membership is a significant determinant of activism highlights the importance of parties engaging young voters in their activists" (p. 277). In regard to voter turnout, one of the areas being explored in jurisdictions around the world is internet voting. In its discussion paper on this mechanism for improved accessibility, Elections B.C. (2011) noted that "[b]ecause access to personal computers and the Internet is not equally distributed throughout the province and society, there are risks that Internet voting may highlight the 'digital divide'" (p. 23).

Youth: Reconstructing Political Engagement

Youth, as a specialized population, is a critical group discussed in the forums and the literature with evidence that youth tend to vote less than other age groups and less than youth historically (Dostie-Goulet, 2009). In an effort to explain this reduced activity, Adsett's (2003) discussion of shifts in voter turnout in the 1980s and 90s asserts that "with the emergence of neo-liberalism, the Canadian state has reduced if not retracted its support to Canadian youth in their transition to adulthood (e.g., post-secondary education, unemployment insurance and housing) in its dismantling of the welfare state. In addition, it has given a low priority to the types of programmes and initiatives that have traditionally concerned Western youth (e.g., equality, and individual and human rights)" (pp. 261-262).

Extending this discussion, "Averill described the problem of youth turnout today as a 'cycle of neglect': 'The ... challenge arises from what young people described as 'the cycle of neglect' that exists between youth and politics. The cycle is rooted in the fact that political parties rarely placed a heavy emphasis on youth issues in their platforms. In turn, this has tended to give little or nothing to follow or take up as a cause, leading them to be apathetic or disinterested. The result, therefore, is a strengthened sense among political leaders and parties that young people can not be engaged, and therefore do not represent a valuable source of political support, thereby giving them little motivation to develop policies directed at young voters. And the cycle continues (2002, p. 11)" (Adsett, 2003, p. 260).

Goodman et al. (2011) assert "that voting is part of a larger picture of political engagement and that changes in conceptions of citizenship norms on the part of young people contribute to lower rates of political participation among the group" (p. 877). Relatedly, Stockemer and Rocher (2017) argue that "political literacy (i.e. a lack of basic political knowledge) explains about half of the turnout gap between generations" (p. 55).

⁶⁴ Media Roundtable, March 9, 2018 – Victoria, British Columbia.

There is potential for a reframing of political literacy to encompass a greater range of activities and strategies.⁶⁵

One of the most consequential aspects of these negative perceptions is that young people conclude that politics is irrelevant to their lives. Further, young people are even more likely than others to become engaged only when an issue impacts them directly.⁶⁶ In this regard, “[t]hese young people know a fair bit about the nature, history, and purposes of the franchise but many are not convinced to exercise it” (Chareka and Sears, 2006, p. 532). Engagement efforts need to reach youth where they are recognizing that their involvement often takes the form of social media activism and alternate forms of political representation. An associated challenge is that these access points increase the likelihood of social bubbles where they are exposed to like ideas and sources of information.⁶⁷

A critical thread and a potentially instructive crevice to mine in change efforts is engaging in more meaningful reconstructions of citizenship engagement. Raby et al. (2017) argue that “[t]he alleged lack of political engagement among youth seems to be closely tied to dominant ideas about what good citizenship should look like (Caron 2011; Kennelly 2011) and reflects a very narrow definition of ‘political engagement’ (O’Neil 2007, 11). That is, when relying on the ‘conventional citizenship’ (Ward 2011, 918) and ‘dutiful citizens’ (Bennett 2008, 14) models, youth are viewed as disengaged because of their disconnection from pre-existing democratic processes (Henn, Weinstein, and Tring 2002)” (p. 497). These assertions were echoed in a number of sessions with an emphasis on the opportunities, not the obstacles associated with this reality.^{68, 69, 70}

Relatedly, “this need to rethink what we mean by political participation is particularly crucial in the current context of media-enabled social change, a context that has made youth culture far more ‘participatory’” (Allen and Light, 2015, p. 18). The breadth of Jenkins’ definition of participatory politics is particularly useful: “that point where participatory culture meets political and civic participation, where political change is promoted through social and cultural mechanisms rather than through established political institutions’ (2016, 2)” (as cited in Raby et al., 2017, p. 497). Issues being grappled with feel overwhelming to youth in their complexity and intractability which can encourage further disengagement.⁷¹ The disillusionment with partisan politics experienced by young people is aggravated by increasingly complex social problems.⁷²

As constructions of political engagement are critiqued, expanded and reconfigured, there needs to be attention paid to the factors that may inhibit or support participating within these broader definitions. Political engagement is shaped by the significant others in young peoples’ lives and there are numerous social determinants that enhance or restrict their opportunities for engagement.⁷³ Queniar’s (2008) study

⁶⁵ Educator Roundtable, May 12, 2018 – Vancouver, British Columbia.

⁶⁶ Youth Roundtable, April 21, 2018 – Victoria, British Columbia.

⁶⁷ Youth Roundtable, April 21, 2018 – Victoria, British Columbia.

⁶⁸ Youth Roundtable, April 21, 2018 – Victoria, British Columbia.

⁶⁹ Educator Roundtable, May 12, 2018 – Vancouver, British Columbia.

⁷⁰ Legislative Intern Roundtable, June 27, 2018 – Victoria, British Columbia.

⁷¹ Youth Roundtable, April 21, 2018 – Victoria, British Columbia.

⁷² Legislative Intern Roundtable, June 27, 2018 – Victoria, British Columbia.

⁷³ Youth Roundtable, April 21, 2018 – Victoria, British Columbia.

highlights that while the youth involved had diverse “activist trajectories that are different from one another, they all come from families that are open-minded with regard to political issues or where a strong socialization process into social or political activism exists” (p. 219). Familial factors are centrally important as is “the socioeconomic status of the parents as well as their political or social participation and political behavior of young adults” (Queniart, 2008, p. 204). Further, Cross and Young (2008b) “suggest that the young people who choose to join political parties are a distinct group The ‘pull’ of family socialization serves to overcome the more general societal ‘push’ away from partisan activism” (p. 365). The idea of differences among youth who are involved and not also highlights that there may be missing sub-groups of young people who are not in school for one reason or another or in their mid-twenties and newly into the job market who are no longer in settings that emphasize civic engagement as a matter of course.⁷⁴

Cross and Young (2008b) assert that their “non-party member cohort is much more like other members of their generation than are the young party members. Recalling that advocacy group activism is a more popular choice for young citizens than party membership, the views of non-members tell us something about the inclinations of the politically-oriented elite of the future” (Cross and Young, 2008b, p. 365).

Another perceived and real obstacle to engagement is the role of voice. Voice is central to politics yet young people often do not have an official voice as it is embodied in the vote and consequently too often they feel their opinions and ideas are marginalized as coming from less education, little life experience, and intense emotions.⁷⁵ In an exploration of this framing of citizenship, Raby et al. (2017) “agree that young people need to be valued as social participants, but . . . also note that agency is frequently discussed through a humanist conceptualization of the individual as independent, self-knowing, rational and coherent (St. Pierre, 2000). These emphases have been used to exclude certain groups, including young people, from self-representation, political participation and citizenship, because they are seen as dependent or irrational (see Lee, 2002)” (p. 497).

The literature supports the position asserted by the participants that there is a public perception that young people are apathetic in relation to political engagement; however, there is evidence that in fact young people are politically invested and the misperception is connected to a cultural gap in relation to the role of social media and alternate settings of civic engagement.^{76,77} Gauthier (2003) argues that “despite commonly held opinions, contemporary young people are far from apathetic. They are active at various levels of involvement in community life, although political partisanship is often considered suspect, even sometimes by those who officially belong to a political party” (p. 274).

Young people are tired of the message of apathy and there is an increased chance of actual disengagement because of it.⁷⁸ It is argued that “[y]oung people have to see examples of how voting can be an effective expression of their voice – a criteria for participation that permeated our data” (Chareka & Sears, 2006, p.

⁷⁴ Youth Roundtable, April 21, 2018 – Victoria, British Columbia.

⁷⁵ Youth Roundtable, April 21, 2018 – Victoria, British Columbia.

⁷⁶ Legislative Intern Roundtable, June 27, 2018 – Victoria, British Columbia.

⁷⁷ Youth Roundtable, April 21, 2018 – Victoria, British Columbia.

⁷⁸ Educator Roundtable, May 12, 2018 – Vancouver, British Columbia.

535). Young people are engaged politically in a variety of ways that are not represented in traditional party politics in part due to the real or perceived lack of representation of their issues by party politics.⁷⁹ Instead, “[t]hese young people are interested in immediate and tangible social change. They prefer causes that tend to be tied in with their identity (female, young person) or with their living conditions (poverty, inequality) and that are also linked to the global future of society and the earth itself, a future for which they feel partly responsible” (Queniart, 2008, p. 220).

Progress would be made by maximizing educators’ efforts to utilize curricular opportunities to promote civic engagement. In response to that challenge, in this unprecedented age of immediate and vast access to information and virtual experience, there is tremendous value in making the Legislature “real” to students through tangible experiences.⁸⁰ Irrespective of the issue, individuals do not change ways of thinking easily and yet “[c]itizenship education programs should include material that will cause students to rethink their conceptions of the political process” (Chareka and Sears, 2006, p. 535). Importantly, young adults need to be engaged in ways that reflect their diversity, including the differences among those pursuing post-secondary education and those who are not, as there is a perception that this distinction is an important one in terms of access and engagement.⁸¹

Young people are motivated by perceived threats to equality, the environment, mobility rights and “[i]n this respect, advances in technological communication (such as the Internet) have encouraged the creation of transnational networks and the development of new activist practices by providing novel ways of actively promoting a new vision of politics (Pleyers, 2004), especially among young people” (Queniart, 2008, p. 207). It is a vision that embeds diversity and intersectionality in identity and experience at its foundation that has the potential to elevate and even further diversify political engagement and expression.

⁷⁹ Legislative Intern Roundtable, June 27, 2018 – Victoria, British Columbia.

⁸⁰ Educator Roundtable, May 12, 2018 – Vancouver, British Columbia.

⁸¹ Legislative Intern Roundtable, June 27, 2018 – Victoria, British Columbia.

Next Steps

Too often, it is assumed that a more aware public equates to a more politically engaged public and while there is merit to increasing awareness, Osborne (2001) (as cited in Chareka and Sears, 2006) “points out, ‘the democratic deficit is the symptom of a structural problem that cannot be fixed through better citizenship education, but only through changes in the political system’” (p. 533).

Further, Goodman et al. (2011) posit that “[t]he larger portion of turnout decline attributed to young people may in part be because of changes in citizenship norms and the fact that they do not perceive voting as an essential ‘civic duty’ but instead feel that, in many circumstances, voting is simply not necessary or meaningful” (p. 879). While this observation is made in relation to young people, many of the Forum participants articulated how this concern might be transferable to other segments of the population and beyond voting to other experiences and motivations for differential engagement.^{82,83}

The emphasis of Year One was to highlight the challenges regarding MLA engagement and use those challenges as the foundation upon which strategies for change would be discussed in Year Two. The areas of exploration identified below are drawn from the findings of the Year One process and will shape the discussion themes for the consultative sessions in Year Two designed to explore potential strategies for change.

- **Civic Education**

Proposed strategies may examine sites of education including K-12, post-secondary, community-based, and social media forums. These locations need to be understood as multi layered opportunities in their use of curricula, pedagogy, teacher training, and technological skill development. Topics may include education about government structures and processes, issue-specific knowledge, as well as skill based orientations emphasizing advocacy, activism, evidence-based decision-making and critical thinking.

- **Public Engagement**

Proposed strategies may aim to address issues associated with public perceptions, internship/student opportunities, policy-related dialogues, and constituency engagement. Specific populations such as youth, Indigenous peoples, and less privileged groups based on factors such as socio-economic status, gender, and ethnicity need to be emphasized in relation to shifting ideas about types of political engagement and finding spaces for historically muted voices and those inclined to be civically and politically less and differently engaged.

⁸² Youth Roundtable, April 21, 2018 – Victoria, British Columbia.

⁸³ Educator Roundtable, May 12, 2018 – Vancouver, British Columbia.

- **Parliamentary Structures and Processes**

Proposed strategies may explore change opportunities in relation to Question Period, party discipline, and portfolio and committee tenure. Lessons may be learned from Indigenous communities with respect to decision-making, debate, and leadership engagement.

- **Media**

Proposed strategies may include: improving access to politicians and the relationships between the two institutions; further engagement with members of the media; cultivating a public demand for less sensationalistic framing of stories; and promoting more in-depth coverage, including developing interest in provincial and local governance.

Year Two of the project will focus on developing strategies to address the issues raised in Year One in a model of change that incorporates short, mid and long term mechanisms. The stakeholder groups invited to participate in Year Two will include the groups in Year One and additional participants/sessions as appropriate. The report submitted at the end of Year Two will be the critical document as it will merge the challenge identification process of Year One with the strategies for change emphasis that is the focus for Year Two.

Conclusion

In discussing voter turnout, Goodman et al. (2011) make the point that “it is increasingly evident that generational replacement is both the strongest and the most important factor in accounting for changing turnout patterns” (Goodman et al., 2011, p. 859). Additionally, there needs to be greater attention paid to a broader array of activities signifying political engagement. In this regard it is not surprising that so many discussion points across the forums emphasized youth as a key site of both challenges and opportunities. Calls for reform are long-standing and any changes need to emphasize providing more meaningful democratizing spaces for public engagement and with that “there is a real possibility that citizen involvement may alter the relative balance of power and influence of different social, political, and economic interests” (Adkin et al., 2016, pp. 301-302). In this regard, an attention to the diversity represented in calls for change has never been more important.

The Year One experience clearly indicates a nuanced and sophisticated understanding of the significant challenges inherent in this discussion, the need for an unprecedented commitment to the need and possibilities for change, and most significantly tremendous enthusiasm for the promotion of positive change.

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Appendix I: List of Roundtables and Participants

Political Scientists February 9 and 10, 2018 | Vancouver, British Columbia

Participants: Dr. Jeanette Ashe, Dr. Gerald Baier, Dr. David E. Smith, Dr. Patrick Smith, Dr. Tracy Summerville, Dr. Hamish Telford, Dr. Paul Thomas, Dr. Daniel Westlake

Media March 9, 2018 | Victoria, British Columbia

Participants: Keith Baldrey, Tom Fletcher, Andrew MacLeod, Vaughn Palmer, Bhinder Sajan, Rob Shaw, Richard Zussman

Youth April 21, 2018 | Victoria, British Columbia

Participants: Leah Bae, Kayla Brent, Caelen Cook, Kyle Dow, Sheridan Hawse, Delphina Kejo, Alexa Lewis, Sky Losier

Educators May 12, 2018 | Vancouver, British Columbia

Participants: Christa Barberis, Jonathan Boone, Sukaina Jaffer, Kirk Longpre, Beverley McEwan, Neil Powell

Legislative Interns June 27, 2018 | Victoria, British Columbia

Participants: Celina Bell, Cate White, Kayla Phillips, Barbara Szymczyk, Matthew Creswick

Former MLAs September 21, 2018 | Victoria, British Columbia

Participants: Bill Goodacre, Jim Gorst, Dave Hayer, Ken Jones, Darlene Marzari, Penny Priddy, Cliff Serwa, Doug Symons

Indigenous Group December 8, 2018 | Victoria, British Columbia

Participants: Eli Enns, Larry McDermott, Art Napoleon, Melissa Quesnelle

Also in Attendance at Speaker's Forum Roundtables

Honourable Darryl Plecas, Speaker of the Legislative Assembly
Dr. Martha Dow, Academic Facilitator
Kate Ryan-Lloyd, Acting Clerk of the Legislative Assembly
Artour Sogomonian, Procedural Clerk

Appendix II: Stakeholder Roundtables

Political Scientists: Key Issues Raised by Participants

- Institutional and cultural challenges within the system are enmeshed in complex ways that need to be disentangled, articulated and understood before change opportunities can be fully considered and ultimately realized. Institutional and cultural norms associated with the adversarial system and their impact present challenges to a representative and responsible government.
- There is a lack of diverse representation in legislatures around the world and that reality results in real and perceived representation issues.
- Distinguishing between a representative legislature and responsible government in structure and process is essential and yet not effectively articulated resulting in stakeholders not understanding the differences and intricacies of the representative, the holding to account, and the law-making functions of the legislature. The general public, no matter the jurisdiction, tends not to understand how its government works and therefore enhanced public education and physical access opportunities might improve this understanding and potentially strengthen aspects of engagement.
- The public feels disconnected from decision-making and disillusioned by the prepared message orientation of politicians' efforts to engage, culminating in a sense of distrust and dissatisfaction. There is also a perception that there is a lack of effectiveness and low accountability in government. The media is a critical instrument and filter in developing political understanding among the general public and specialized audiences; therefore, there is tremendous potential to shift the landscape of engagement through the media.
- The particular expertise held by elected Members is not utilized, or only partially utilized, resulting in potentially less effective governance and contributing to the disillusionment of the public.
- In relation to the work of MLAs, there are impediments embedded in committee structures and processes, including role definition, selection of the chair, composition, power to initiate inquiries, reporting out and other transparency measures. Private Members' relationship to the executive is often less productive than the public and Members assume it should be and Question Period is not conducive to meaningful dialogue and debate on substantive issues. Additionally, there are pressures associated with caucus solidarity, party politics and the associated discipline. Central to shaping these dynamics is understanding the nature of the First Minister's leadership model in relation to the role of the executive, all Members, party discipline, voting, and caucus and party activities.
- The current use of Members' Statements is not clear in purpose and consequently it is difficult to assess their value. There needs to be a bridging of constituency representation with broader party policy and agenda-setting paying attention to the likely disconnect between constituents' expectations of representation and what are the realities of representation.

- There are challenges and opportunities associated with decentralization of agenda-setting to support more inclusive and timely policy debates and discussions informed through greater development and utilization of policy sector expertise within government and opposition parties, and an enhanced model to support amendments to bills.

Media: Key Issues Raised by Participants

- It is critical that the complexities of the parliamentary system and associated procedures be explained to the public and ‘insiders’. There is a need to provide timely and accessible information to the public and stakeholders (including the media to communicate with the general public) that is both event/issue specific but that also takes advantage of those opportunities to provide more general information highlighting the ongoing need for public engagement.
- There is a perceived disconnect between who politicians are as they are elected, re-elected and engage in their communities and how they behave in the Legislature. The public is disillusioned and the subsequent lack of engagement is fueled by the perception that politicians are working within party defined boxes characterized by a lack of transparency, very few “work days”, and seemingly ill-advised policy decisions.
- Connected to these challenges is a lack of understanding of the roles and responsibilities of the various levels of government and an associated greater interest in the federal system. There seems to be a much greater interest in federal politics than provincial and municipal politics despite the everyday connection that British Columbians have to the issues that are the responsibility of the provincial government. While the media plays a critical role in how the public understands and consequently engages with government structures, there have been enormous shifts in how people consume information and develop knowledge based on that consumption. British Columbians, by their diversity, represent different challenges to engagement that need to be explored and then responded to in order to facilitate meaningful access to provincial politics.
- There are challenges that result from the structures and processes of the government being shaped through the centralization of power in the Office of the Premier.
- Activists and the general public see petition involvement as political agency without understanding limitations within the procedural framework associated with petitions, most notably that the majority of petitions do not comply with Standing Order requirements, and are determined to be out of order. The embedded tension is that as the public develops a better understanding of these procedural realities there will likely be even further disillusionment.
- Party politics can stifle meaningful public consultation and debate through formal structures (e.g. committees are chaired by Members who must stay within party lines), and informally through party discipline. Additionally, Question Period is not designed in a manner that supports meaningful debate and encourages the theatrics that are associated with heckling. Heckling is part of the adversarial system, and may support greater accountability; however, there can be a public perception that this behaviour is at the very least unbecoming contributing to further disillusionment with politicians and the efficacy of the Legislative Assembly.

- The media is challenged by some aspects of the physical plant and “rules of engagement” that make it more difficult to hold MLA’s to account and/or simply get clarity on issues raised in the House. Relatedly, the Parliament Buildings themselves are not necessarily welcoming to all, resulting in missed opportunities to connect British Columbians to their political history and the current issues related to their everyday lives.

Youth: Key Issues Raised by Participants

- Young people, and the public in general, do not understand the structure, and importance of provincial politics and generally hold negative and relatively uninformed and oversimplified views of politicians. One of the most consequential aspects of these perceptions is that young people conclude that politics is irrelevant to their lives. The education system does not do a particularly good job of translating education about politics to engagement in politics.
- Political engagement is shaped by the significant others in young peoples’ lives and there are numerous social determinants that enhance or restrict their opportunities for engagement. Further, young people are even more likely than others to become engaged only when an issue impacts them directly.
- Engagement efforts need to reach youth where they are recognizing that their involvement often takes the form of social media activism and alternate forms of political representation. An associated challenge is that these access points increase the likelihood of social bubbles where they are exposed to like ideas and sources of information.
- There may be missing sub-groups of young people who are not in school for one reason or another or in their mid-twenties and newly into the job market who are no longer in settings that emphasize civic engagement as a matter of course.
- Voice is central to politics yet young people often do not have the official voice as it is embodied in the vote and too often feel their opinions and ideas are marginalized as coming from less education, little life experience, and intense emotions. Youth are disillusioned as they see politics as overly partisan, and at times hostile, when the system was designed to be elected officials representing their constituents in and to government. There is a disconnect between what youth are learning about the role of good government and what is being represented in the media often characterized by reactionary, insincere and vitriolic exchanges.
- Issues being grappled with feel overwhelming to youth in their complexity and intractability which can encourage further disengagement.
- There are few opportunities that allow Members to really engage with the needs of their constituents in the Legislature. Private Members’ participation through bill development and Members’ statements is marginalized to an almost symbolic position.

Educators: Key Issues Raised by Participants

- There is a public perception that young people are apathetic in relation to political engagement; however, there is evidence that in fact young people are politically invested and the misperception is connected to a cultural gap in relation to the role of social media and alternate settings of civic

engagement. Young people are tired of the message of apathy and there is an increased chance of actual disengagement because of it.

- The importance of connecting students and parents to civic engagement in sustainable ways is critical with examples such as the B.C. Teachers' Institute on Parliamentary Democracy, and the development of strategic partnerships between school districts and local MLAs within a provincial framework being pointed to as models for change.
- Progress would be made by maximizing educators' efforts to utilize curricular opportunities to promote civic engagement. In response to that challenge, in this unprecedented age of immediate and vast access to information and virtual experience, there is tremendous value in making the legislature "real" to students through tangible experiences.
- It is increasingly difficult to deal with the disconnect between behaviour and cultural norms in the House and broader society, and in particular in schools dealing with bullying, harassment, marginalization, and inappropriate comments and behaviours.

Legislative Interns: Key Issues Raised by Participants

- It is difficult to understand how the legislature works without insider status, yet it is that understanding that will strengthen the public's connections with government activities.
- Young people are engaged politically in a variety of ways that are not represented in traditional party politics, in part due to the real or perceived lack of representation of their issues by party politics.
- Young people need to be engaged in ways that reflect their diversity, including the differences among those attending university and those who are not as there is a perception that this distinction is an important one in terms of access and engagement.
- There is disillusionment with partisan politics on the part of young people in the face of increasingly complex social problems.
- Party discipline is an impediment to collaborative and creative approaches to policy development across party lines. Associated with this concern is a lack of emphasis on background research undertaken to support policy discussions and inadequate representativeness and diversity of experiences and views characterizing those conducting the research.
- There are not enough opportunities in the K-12 system to provide effective educational opportunities about politics and governance emphasizing critical thinking, evidence-informed problem-solving, and media literacy. Efforts to change this reality may ultimately have an impact in making politics relevant in the everyday lives of citizens.
- Social media and mainstream media play a key role in potentially educating and increasing access to the public; however, both also serve to further alienate young people as it is used in negative ways that exacerbate the perception of partisanship.

- There needs to be more attention paid to decorum in the Legislature as heckling and even word choices and tone contribute to the alienation of “outsiders” as these behaviours are out of step with the rest of society and workplace expectations.

Former MLAs: Key Issues Raised by Participants

- Private Members have a minimal role in government and like other Members have inadequate opportunities to speak on behalf of their constituents due to party politics and associated party discipline.
- New Members have minimal knowledge regarding their role and relationship to government processes including the basics of what it means to be part of a representative and responsible government.
- There need to be educational avenues for the general public developed in conjunction with associated opportunities for enhanced engagement based on their improved understanding.
- The current balance of power favours the bureaucracy supporting the leader, which further marginalizes the voices of MLAs.
- A more critical discussion of confidentiality, transparency, and methods of communication that support debate and collaborative dialogue needs to be supported.
- Language such as the “back bench” further marginalizes certain Members.
- Question Period is simply a performance and the posturing has the consequence of acting as a deterrent to women and others who find these tactics unappealing and unproductive.
- The media has an ability to contribute to problems in public perception and indeed a culture of partisan politics or mitigate these perceptions and dynamics and promote more meaningful public engagement with the processes and substantive issues.

Indigenous Group: Key Issues Raised by Participants

- There needs to be integration of Indigenous and non-Indigenous processes and structures as they relate to legal, political, environmental, familial and other spheres of influence. This integration has the potential to create “ethical spaces” that are foundational for moving forward in truly collaborative and mutually respectful and responsible ways.
- Chief and Council structures and processes have been imposed on Indigenous communities and create challenges for traditional mechanisms of decision-making and leadership. For example, voting, as one aspect of an imposed structure, has been internalized by some as fundamental to a democratic system.
- Canada, like many jurisdictions around the world, is engaged in governmental reform efforts as adversarial systems are in many ways contrary to inclusive, collaborative decision-making.
- It is extremely challenging to engage individuals in political processes, particularly when they are oppressive by their nature, when these individuals are struggling with many basic needs.

- “Indigenous legal traditions need to maintain their own legitimacy. The Crown systems need to maintain their own structure and legitimacy. Then we need to find an equitable way for these two systems to interact.”
- “We’re reviving our cross-cultural literacy. It’s what built our relationship originally, but we lost our way. So we’re reviving that tradition – those strengths that we share.”
- “Canada is a Euro-Indigenous social innovation. It was co-created through peace and friendship treaties. It’s built right into the constitution of the country.”
- The adversarial system is dehumanizing as it is too often accusatory, hostile and unforgiving. Traditional Indigenous models of governance have the potential to be more inclusive and accessible in part because they are characterized by humility, natural forms of leadership and consensus decision-making.
- There is greater demand from youth, community leaders and academics to engage in more groundswell political activism due to being disillusioned with current processes.
- “One of the most insidious concepts that has entered our culture is the idea that you could be somebody other than you are just by being behind a job title. We have many teachings in our culture about the dangers associated with putting on the guise of another being something other than you are.”
- There is a counter-intuitive manufactured outsider status of Indigenous peoples generally that is magnified by a political system that entrenches othering through the *Indian Act* and the many structures and processes that flow out of that legislation.
- In regard to processes that challenge traditions governance structures, “imagine if you’re on a canoe journey, and every two hours, you change who is steering the canoe, and everyone has a different place they want to go to. The canoe would be going through the lake or the ocean sometimes going backwards, maybe not moving at all. ... Imagine you’re on a journey as a nation, together, you have to have a clear vision of where you’re going, and there’s a responsibility of the steersman, but also, there’s a responsibility for everyone else who’s in the canoe, whether you’re paddling or bailing water out of the canoe. When you dock to camp, everyone has a different role and responsibility, and one is not more important than the other. This is how our nations used to be.”
- Critical issues for Indigenous peoples are geopolitical in nature and relate to encroachment and cumulative impact which are aggravated by at best ineffective and at worst disingenuous consultative processes.
- Too often when legal remedies are sought and won through the colonial system, those working in the system thwart those successes through systemic and procedural obstructionism.
- The general public and many politicians do not have a good understanding of their own histories, the history of Canada, and certainly not Indigenous histories.
- In terms of natural leadership, “one of the words for our people is ‘Many Chiefs’ because they came across us, and they couldn’t quite figure out how the system worked because the best person for the job stepped in and was Chief at that point in time.”

- In thinking about the adversarial and too often aggressive nature of the system, “any system that doesn’t foster those values of humility, truth, bravery, love and respect is ... violating the human gifts we’ve been given.”
- Both on and off reserve it is reasonably argued by some that democracy only exists when citizens are voting.
- On engagement with the federal and provincial governments, dealing with the provincial government has been viewed by many as potentially lessening Indigenous stature with the federal government.
- Framing duty to consult as a goal without a concomitant understanding to consult in a collaborative manner aimed at reaching consensus is a meaningless protection.
- Relationships as they are developed with people, not positions or offices, are fundamental to good governance from an Indigenous perspective yet the colonial system is structured to build systemic rather than personal relationships.
- It is critical that an essentializing discourse does not guide discussions of Indigenous issues as the complexities, diversity, and rich tapestry of Indigenous peoples is integral to good governance.

Author's Biographical Information

Dr. Martha Dow is a researcher and consultant working in the areas of citizenship education and organizational change and is an Associate Professor in the Department of Social, Cultural and Media Studies at the University of the Fraser Valley. Contact her at martha.dow@ufv.ca for further information.

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