



British Columbia Teachers' Federation

100-550 West 6th Avenue, Vancouver, BC V5Z 4P2 • 604-871-2283, 1-800-663-9163 • www.bctf.ca
TTY 604-871-2185 (deaf and hard of hearing) Executive Office fax: 604-871-2290

Electoral Process

A brief to the

**Local Government
Elections Task Force**

from the

British Columbia Teachers' Federation

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President

Executive Director

Electoral Process Brief 2010

BC Teachers' Federation

<http://www.bctf.ca/BriefsAndPositionPapers.aspx>

The British Columbia Teachers' Federation (BCTF), established in 1917, is the union of professionals representing 41,000 public school teachers in the province of British Columbia, Canada. The BCTF appreciates the opportunity to provide this brief submission to the Local Government Elections Task Force.

The BCTF has an established commitment to encourage its members to become involved in local municipal, school board, provincial, and federal elections by advocating for a strong and stable, fully funded public education.

The importance of local school boards cannot be understated. The BCTF believes that the best form of education governance maintains a significant role for elected trustees who represent their community. Elected school boards have been an important institution of democracy. For more than a century, local school boards have been the voice of communities by electing trustees who personally reflected the community's interest and needs. That strong tradition should not be undermined by eliminating elections, by regionalizing school boards through amalgamation, or by moving responsibility from elected representatives to provincial bureaucrats. For more than a century, local school boards have been the voice of communities—elected trustees who reflect the community's interest and needs.

The BCTF has the understanding that the task force will make recommendations to the Legislature based on its mandate and guiding principles. Reflecting these principles, the Federation is making the following comments on the electoral process for local government elections. Specifically, the issues of:

- the corporate vote
- the role of the chief electoral officer (BC) in local elections
- the election cycle.

Corporate vote

The BCTF is firmly opposed to permitting corporations to vote in local government elections. The principle of “one person, one vote” is a long-standing cornerstone of our democracy. The proposal for corporate voting would put that principle at serious risk.

The concept of reinstating the corporate vote does not stand the test of the guiding principles set out by the task force.

Restoring the corporate vote in local government elections in BC would appear to create an inconsistency between local election rules in this province and the rules governing municipal, provincial, and federal elections across Canada. Corporations have never been able to vote in Canadian federal elections or in provincial elections in BC.

Restoration of the corporate vote without an extensive study or analysis of the impacts and implications could result in confusion and possibly leave the issue of eligibility open to abuse. At the moment, no one clearly understands how a corporation would become eligible to vote or who would cast the ballot. The administration of the rules concerning the eligibility of corporations to vote would have the potential to increase the cost of local elections.

There is no viable reason to restore the corporate vote. A corporation is not an individual. Nor do corporations make decisions for the good of the community; corporate decisions are based for the most part, on profit. The corporate vote has been phased out everywhere because there is a basic understanding that electoral democracy is a method by which individual citizens are able to influence decisions about their government. Corporate influence on government decisions already exists locally and provincially. Other organizations, such as churches, unions, and societies who hold property or operate in communities, might also be considered to have some interest in civic issues. Yet, there is no mention of considering extending voting to those groups.

The election cycle

The BCTF is opposed to increasing the length of the term of office for school trustees; school boards in the past were elected for two-year terms. A three-year term has been seen as a reasonable commitment for any citizen willing to stand for trustee. A longer term may become a barrier to participation by the ordinary citizen concerned about a lengthy commitment, and a longer term limits opportunities for electors to express their opinions at the polls in terms of performance by a school board and the trustees.

The role of the chief electoral officer in local elections

While the Ministry of Community and Rural Development provides a number of resources to local governments during the local government election process, it is clear that many communities struggle with appropriate enforcement of elections rules and securing compliance with campaign finance and disclosure requirements.

Enforcement provisions for local government elections are sometimes unclear, and are certainly less rigorous than those at the provincial level. Because oversight of the elections process and any complaints arising is exercised by local governments and their staff, there could be a perception of a conflict of interest. There is also a very real concern about the level of resources and expertise available to investigate election-related complaints. In the last election, problems arose in several communities, violations of registration and disclosures were alleged, and complaints made. Citizens were told they would have to go to the police who were reluctant to get involved. Blair Lekstrom, MLA, Peace River South, commented in an interview the day before the November 15, 2008 province-wide elections: “it couldn’t possibly be that it would be left up to citizens to police and prosecute any election irregularities; that is the role of the police.” This weakness in the current legislation needs to be corrected.

The authority of Elections BC, under the *BC Election Act*, should be extended to enforce local government election legislation. This would include investigating public complaints related to possible violations and the right to independently initiate audits or investigations where it deems such an investigation to be in the public interest.

Conclusion

The BCTF encourages the Local Government Elections Task Force to make the following recommendations regarding local government election reform in BC:

- a. no introduction of a “corporate vote” in local government elections
- b. no increase in the length of the term of office for school trustees
- c. an amendment to the *BC Election Act* improving the independence and oversight of the municipal officer responsible for monitoring the local government election and finances.

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