

**May 25, 2024**

## Remarks from the Chair, Sara McPhee-Knowles on the first Gathering Day of the Yukon Citizens' Assembly on Electoral Reform.

Hello everyone.

I would like to begin by acknowledging that the Yukon sits on the traditional territories of all 14 Yukon First Nations as well as the traditional territory of bordering First Nations in northern British Columbia, the Northwest Territories, and Alaska.

The Yukon Citizens' Assembly on Electoral Reform is grateful for the opportunity to do this work and host Assembly gatherings on the traditional territories of the Kwanlin Dün First Nation, Ta'an Kwäch'än Council and Carcross/Tagish First Nation. We are fortunate to have 38 members from across the Yukon.

Welcome to the first of four gatherings of the Yukon Citizens' Assembly on Electoral Reform. My name is Sara McPhee-Knowles, and I am the Assembly Chair.

Thank you for being here. Each of you is a valuable part of the journey and conversation ahead.

Collectively, as members, you are the Yukon in one room.

Throughout our time together, you will learn about different electoral systems, different ways people vote and elect their legislatures around the world, the benefits and challenges of each system, and then through discussion and deliberation, arrive at a recommendation on whether the territory should keep the system we have, or change to a different one.

At its heart, a Citizens' Assembly is a learning process and a problem-solving process.

Citizens' assemblies are based on the premise that a group of ordinary people, when given the right information, resources and time, can find common ground and work together to make decisions for the common good.

From that premise, I encourage you to keep an open mind throughout this process.

The Citizens' Assembly process is designed to provide you with factual information, and then provide space for you to work through it together, address questions and concerns that arise, and then come to a recommendation.

Citizen Assemblies and similar processes have been used around the world and across Canada to shape policy responses to issues as diverse, and sometimes polarizing, as airport noise, pharmacare, mental health, housing legislation, reproductive rights, hospital services and budgeting, municipal amalgamation, and electoral reform.

Citizens' Assemblies begin with the assumption that you, the public, are a valuable, and mostly untapped resource. That your collective wisdom and ability to deliberate is deeply valuable to our community.

You have been entrusted to undertake this work on behalf of Yukoners: everyone who can vote today, and everyone will have the right to vote in the future.

What is both exciting and a little scary for me right now is that I have no idea what the outcome of our work will be. I'm sure many of you are feeling the same way.

That being said: we are using a tried-and-true process, and all of you are here to contribute. I'm looking forward to working with you over the next several months as we come to a recommendation.

Let's get started!

-----

And with that, I'd like to introduce Ernie Lennie. Ernie is a Dene storyteller and artist. He's a former member of Canada's cross country ski team and competed in the 1976 winter Olympics. Ernie is from Tuelita, NWT – where the two rivers meet – and spent 10 years in residential school in Inuvik. Ernie would like to offer some words to help us start out this process in a good way.

Ernie will be with us during the sessions to provide support to anyone as needed. If you need to chat, either about the proceedings or anything else, please find him. He's here to provide support and help us move forward with this work in a good way.

Next, I'd like to introduce the team.

Christy Huey is the Deputy Chair/Lead facilitator. Most of you will have spoken with Christy in the lead up to today's event. She's your main point of contact for anything you need as members.

Next we have Michael Vernon, Communications. Michael has been hard at work putting together press releases, website content and public Zoom sessions for our events.

Once again, we have Ernie, who is our Elder and is providing support to members and the staff team.

Next, at each table, we have our team of student facilitators from the Business Administration and Social Work programs YukonU. The students will be working with you through the different activities and the groups will rotate each weekend (and maybe more often) so you'll get a chance to work with many people in the room. Our students are Sumit, Cali, Mehak, Robert, Matthew, Marie and Heather. Chloe is another one of our students who will be here next weekend.

Also, I'd like to thank Heather Roach, who has been in charge of event planning, and offer our thanks to AliCat who is catering this weekend.

At this point, I'd like all of you to introduce yourselves!

(If map of the room – north south east and west – ask people to move to roughly where they live in the Yukon according to those directions – ask a student facilitator to help pass around mic)

Briefly – aim for 30 seconds – please state your name, which community you live in, why you volunteered for the citizens' assembly and a positive attribute you bring to the process.

-----

Thank you all – we have a great group here and I appreciate your dedication and commitment to participating – especially in the warmer months – I know how precious those summer weekends are!

Next, I'd like to welcome Premier Ranj Pillai to offer some opening remarks on behalf of the Yukon government.

I'd now like to welcome Minister John Streicker to offer some opening remarks.

The Official Opposition declined to participate and has instead sent a letter, which you can find in your binders. I'm disappointed that they didn't take the opportunity to share their perspective on this issue – this is a missed opportunity. Even though they've criticized the process, they wish you well. Disagreement and differences in perspective are typical on big, systems-level issues like electoral reform. If everyone agreed on this issue, then we wouldn't need to be here and undertake a citizens' assembly process.

I'd now like to welcome Kate White, Leader of the Yukon NDP, to offer some opening remarks.

On that note – let's break for 10 minutes for coffee.

Please complete your pre-survey if you haven't already done so.

-----

I hope everyone is well caffeinated. We're going to have a more in depth overview of the process and mandate.

Serving on a citizens' assembly is a special trust. We're grateful to all of you who has volunteered your time to be here. Together, we'll help shape the work of government and be at the centre of a conversation on behalf of Yukoners on how we want to elect Members of the Legislative Assembly.

This is an important issue that incorporates values, representation, traditions and colonial history. It is up to each of us to work in good faith on behalf of Yukoners who we are representing and serving. I encourage everyone to set aside personal interests in this issue and think about the bigger picture as we work together.

I spoke about this briefly this morning – the premise of a citizen’s assembly is that a group of ordinary people can produce informed public judgment when given enough information and time. This is really different from most public meetings – we’re starting from the assumption that the public is a resource, not a risk, and can deliberate over time to provide recommendations.

The assembly’s mandate is set out in our terms of reference.

Our task is to examine electoral systems, and issue a report recommending whether the current model used for electing members of the Legislative Assembly should be retained or another model should be adopted. <slide change>

There were a few other pieces in our mandate – our decision needs to reflect the importance of balance for urban and rural representation. If we recommend adopting a different model, we can only recommend one such model and much provide a detailed description.

Our report may also suggest wording for a question to be put to the Yukon public, following consultation with Elections Yukon and the Yukon Bureau of Statistics.

The report must be submitted by October 31, 2024. As you know, we haven’t released member names publicly at this point; we plan to publish names in the final report.

Are there questions about our task before I continue?

-----

We’ll now move into the program overview. We have four weekends to complete our work – and the October 31 deadline is what dictated the schedule. We’re meeting this weekend, then Jun 8-9, we’ll have a break until the end of August, and then meet August 24-25) and September 7-8. Once again, we’re appreciative of everyone agreeing to participate during the warmer months – I know it’s hard to give up those camping weekends, and we wanted to be mindful of school break, long weekends and hunting season.

You might be thinking that this is too much time to spend in workshops, or that this nowhere near enough time to complete the work we have in store for us – the good news is that there are some well-established best practices for deliberative processes that recommend no fewer than four in person meeting days, and we’ll be meeting for eight days – we felt that this would strike the balance.

Citizens' assemblies are really a learning process. You're going to learn, work together and deliberate (not debate!) as we go forward toward making a recommendation. Deliberation is a word we've used a number of times so far, and it's really about dialogue. And dialogue is about listening, suspending judgment, and examining the question at hand (not just the answer). Overall, over our four weekend gatherings we'll move from learning on the front end to more deliberation in the final two weekends. You have support from me, Christy, the facilitators and Ernie as we go through this process – please let us know if there is something you need – we also have a suggestion box at the registration table if you'd like to leave feedback that way.

This diagram shows the focus of the four gatherings. This first weekend is focused on values both as an underpinning of systems and as a guide for our future work. The next weekend in June we'll be focused on issues, and will be more heavily leaning on learning from one of our experts, Jonathan Rose who is a political scientist from Queen's University, on electoral systems.

During our break in July and early August, we'll be taking direction from you, the members, back to experts to develop several scenarios that we can work on refining at our third meeting in August. We'll spend Saturday, August 24 in Carcross at the beautiful Haa Shagoon Hidi community centre, and we'll discuss the public submissions we've received as we identify priorities and refining scenarios. Sunday, Aug 25 we'll be at the Kaff at YukonU and we'll keep working on scenarios and narrowing down options. Our last meeting in September will be focused on drafting our recommendation and report materials.

At points in this process you might feel frustrated, or like there's too much information to possibly wade through, the whole exercise is impossible, and we'll never get to a recommendation. This is normal and part of the process. The diamond of despair is real! Name it! We'll all get through it together.

This slide shows the structure of the day a bit more – we'll have admin (which is mostly me talking), dialogue sessions in green and presentations in blue. The presentations/learning sessions will be open to the public via Zoom – recordings will be posted on our website for anyone to review.

Dialogue/deliberative sessions will not be on Zoom so that everyone feels like they can ask questions and speak more freely. As we go, you can see that there will be fewer learning sessions and more emphasis on dialogue and deliberation.

What questions do you have about the structure before I continue?

Throughout these weekends – we'll mostly be asking questions. There's a big element of inquiry and curiosity in this process. We're asking whether something better is possible? We'll be focusing on being clear about the problems we're trying to solve, and whether an electoral system can help solve those problems. We're hoping to have some fun while we do so, too, and showcase this process, so that maybe it can be used in the Yukon on other issues that are important to Yukoners. (Housing anyone?)

Next – admin details – if you have questions about food, your hotel arrangements, paperwork, if you need something to have a better experience at the next meeting, or anything at all, please get in touch with Christy – she’s here to help ensure that you have the best experience possible while participating in the Assembly. Please make sure you have her email in your address book so that messages don’t go to spam!

I also wanted to mention part of our governance structure for the citizens’ assembly. We have set up an independent advisory and oversight group that I meet with regularly – they reviewed the program and are contributing to the evaluation (the pre-survey we’ve asked you to complete is part of that.) The advisory committee is Kelvin Leary, a retired civil servant, Lindsay Cornell (who has lots of experience in the non-profit sector) and Marjan Ehsassi, who has expertise in citizens’ assemblies. Some of them may attend later meetings but unfortunately none could be here today.

Should you have a concern that you feel hasn’t been adequately resolved by the YCA staff, you can reach out to them at this email address which is also posted on our website. The terms of reference for the advisory group are also on our website if you’d like to take a look.

A caution about social media – we ask that you please not post about the ongoing work of the Assembly on your personal social media pages. Learning sessions are open to the public via Zoom and there is an option to sign up for email newsletters on our website, as well. Encourage folks who are interested in this process to go to [yukoncitizensassembly.ca](http://yukoncitizensassembly.ca) for information about the process.

-----

Plan for today: we’ll go over our values for working and procedures for working together. Then Lunch!  
Very important.

Then we’ll have two keynotes. We’ll then have a longer break so you can go home or back to the hotel, go for a walk, whatever you need to do – and then we ask that you return for 6 PM for supper and a political perspectives panel where we’ll have two current MLAs joining us to talk about what a day in the life of an MLA is like. You’ll have an opportunity to ask questions as well.

Tomorrow – we’ll recap what we did today since it’s a big day, confirm our working values, and then we have Tosh Southwick joining us for a keynote on values in governance systems, we’ll break for lunch and then spend a shorter afternoon working on discussions about values and what’s important to us in our electoral systems. Once we have that list we’ll be sharing it with Jonathan to incorporate into his work with us in June.

For our first small group activity – now you’ve heard about the mandate and the overall process we’re going to go through, keep those in mind for this activity. We’re going to collaboratively work on developing values that should guide us as we work together over the next few months. Values reflect what we believe and what we stand for – they act as a common reference point or shared code of conduct. What values should be reflected in the way we work together as an assembly? How do we

believe we should conduct ourselves as Assembly members and how do we want our fellow members to conduct themselves?

You have some cards on your table with values words for working together. These are a starting point. In about 20 minutes, discuss and add any missing values to the 'blank' cards.

With guidance from your facilitators, prioritize 2-4 values that your group feels are the most important ones in guiding the way we work together. Please assign someone to report back to the larger group. We'll be summarizing these into a list for further discussion and confirmation tomorrow morning.

-----

After report out: we're going to review our procedures. They're in your binder and it's a short document. The main points are: our main approach is to be guided by reasonableness – basically an informal but organized approach. No Roberts rules here, unless we collectively decide later on that's necessary. I'll let you read through, and then work in your groups to discuss for about 5 minutes. Plan to report out any questions or feedback.

After Q&A: Proposed decision

Critical thinking video on how to ask good questions – sure many of you are well versed in this.

**Keynotes:**

We're now on Zoom and have some members of the public joining us. Encourage you to take notes and ask questions of our presenters - raise your hand and we'll come to you with a microphone so that everyone can hear.

Our first presenter is Max Harvey, Chief Electoral Officer of Elections Yukon. He was first appointed to that role in May 2018. Max has over 20 years of experience in senior electoral administration positions at federal and territorial levels, and he is passionate about the administration of democratic processes that determine political power in the Yukon. Some key things to pay attention to in Max's presentation are terminology around elections administration and legal precedent that drives decisionmaking. Please join me in welcoming Max.

Our next presenter is Tony Penikett. Tony has spent many years in public life, including 5 terms in the Yukon Legislative Assembly and two terms as Premier. His government negotiated settlements of Yukon First Nation land claims and passed important legislation in education, health and language. Tony is an experienced negotiator and has also written several books and two films. His presentation will cover political development in the Yukon, and key things to pay attention to are the evolution of electoral politics over time. Please join me in welcoming Tony.

**Summary notes:**

Today was a big day! We'll only have one presentation tomorrow and more small group work.

Extended break – please return for 6 PM for supper and our panel discussion.