REFORMING ONTARIO’S ELECTORAL SYSTEM
SUBMISSION TO THE ONTARIO CITIZENS’ ASSEMBLY

By Fair Vote Canada – National Capital Region Chapter

Introduction
The Ontario Citizens’ Assembly has been asked to do two things. First, the Assembly has been asked to decide whether or not Ontario should change its electoral system and, second, if so to propose by what sort of voting system Ontario would best be served. In our submission, by the National Capital Region Chapter of Fair Vote Canada (NCR – FVC), we have decided to focus on the first of your objectives, the reasons to change the system, because it is our impression that many of the specialists making presentations to you may want to emphasize the new principles and models which should inspire Ontario’s electoral reform. Our presentation in support of changing the current electoral system will try to answer three questions: what has changed in Ontario to make the reform of its electoral system a necessity; second, eight reasons why the First-Past-The-Post (FPTP) system is no longer adequate for Canada or Ontario; lastly, principles and practices that may help you in your deliberations.

A. Changes in Ontario that Require Electoral Reform
In a democracy, one should not rush blindly into electoral reform. The electoral system is one of the key defining practices of democracy. So, the first question we always have to ask ourselves is why? Why should we bother about changing our well-established system of voting? One good way of answering is to look at the situation in Ontario when it adopted its present voting system, and then look at the changes in Ontario since then to see whether they indicate that our voting system is now past its best before date.

Our mode of electing Members of Parliament and Provincial Parliaments ((MPs and MPPs) has evolved somewhat since they were created – for instance, at the time of Confederation in the 1860s it was possible for an MP to be elected in two ridings at a time, there was no secret ballot, and finally, boundary manipulation (or “gerrymandering”) by the party in power was common up until the 1970s. We are still trying to get election financing right. Nevertheless, in its essentials, the First-Past-The-
Post system, as instituted in 1867, has remained intact. From the beginning, it was intended that the candidate with a majority of the votes in the two-party system would be declared elected, the party with the most seats would form the government; and the other party would be the loyal opposition. There was no thought but that democratically elected majorities would govern.

Why did we adopt this particular electoral system which appears to have worked quite well for some time? There are a number of reasons, but historical tradition was the main one. We simply inherited our voting system from the ‘mother country’, Great Britain. It was, in fact, one of Great Britain’s political claims to fame. It allowed loose coalitions of politicians to band together in order to gain and maintain political power in a fairly stable manner. It also allowed one group to replace another without bloodshed. Today, we should not forget these achievements. Historically, it had grown up over the centuries as British monarchs accepted parties of ‘loyal opposition’ that could later become the king’s advisors and form the government.

At the time there were other compelling reasons for adopting First-Past-The-Post. Ontario had a thin population spread across a large territory and needed a system for representing its large constituencies effectively. Historically, politics in Canada had evolved around the rather upper class and conservative party of the (colonial) government and the more radical, reformist opposition. We were not far from Britain’s aristocratic roots and this was reflected in the debates of the day. Although Canada was founded with many of the trappings of democracy, amongst the élites of the time there were still great doubts about the intelligence and loyalty of the masses, so an electoral system that formed solid governing majorities was preferred at the time – just as they formed unelected ‘upper houses’ where the wealthy upper classes were certain to be represented.

Why have we kept the system for so long despite enormous changes in our society and politics? There is mainly one reason. It is called habit. In this case, habit has a number of components. First, FPTP worked pretty well for a number of decades. There were only two parties which alternated and provided relatively stable, majority government. This all
ended in the 1920s when we started developing a multiparty system. Nevertheless, by then, First-Past-The-Post had become a tradition.

Second, it was becoming a question of status. Canada was becoming known as one of the model democracies of the world and this was based on the Westminster parliamentary system with the party and electoral systems that came along with it. Even today, one hears people say that if it is good enough for the great traditional democracies like the United States and Great Britain, it’s still good enough for us. In fact, however, it is no longer good enough for Great Britain where Scotland, Ireland and Wales have all moved on to a more proportional system. As for the American electoral system, it has become a world scandal where 93 percent of members of Congress are automatically reelected, largely because there is nothing to prevent corrupt electoral financing and there is still large scale gerrymandering.

Third, habit is reinforced by the older political party elites who find First-Past-The-Post to their taste because they are used to it and know how to use it to win on a regular basis. It has been pretty good to them. Fourth, habit is again reinforced by the old parties who say you don’t want to tinker with new electoral systems that don’t work very well. Then they trot out the old scary examples of instability in Israel and Italy, forgetting to mention the 75 countries where proportional systems work quite well, thank you. It is hard to change established systems because politicians who benefit from the existing system don’t want people to imagine anything better exists for their country.

Unfortunately, however, this very old voting system no longer works in our country or our province, which have changed in every other way. In one sentence, we may say that our society has become too populous, too pluralist and too complex to be held back by an out-of-date voting system that does not and cannot represent its diversity. Electoral systems need to be redesigned to maximize representation of parties composed of better educated generations, gender equality, vocal minorities, regional economic differences, multiple linguistic, ethnic and religious communities. Electoral systems are all about generating appropriate representation for the majority of citizens. Canada is no longer a
majoritarian democracy. Neither MPPs nor most Ontario governments are supported by a majority of the votes. This is unacceptable in a society where democratic values and aspirations have now come to eclipse many previous governance values.

Based on this all too brief review of Ontario’s electoral system, it would seem the Citizens’ Assembly has several basic questions it should ask itself. Do we still want to be limited by a horse and buggy voting system invented on the heels of a feudal monarchy? Do we want a system with aristocratic and authoritarian overtones? Is it appropriate to have an electoral system that contravenes majoritarian democracy? Is it sufficient to keep an electoral system simply because one political class knows how to use it? Do we need to fear adapting our electoral system when highly successful democracies in other parts of the world have proven that more flexible and representative models work better?

B. Eight Reasons Why Ontario and Canada Need New Electoral Systems

Here are 8 reasons why Ontario and Canada need to change our electoral systems now:

**Unequal Votes**

1). In a real democracy, there should be fair representation and votes should count equally. This would mean that a party’s number of votes would be translated fairly into its number of seats in its Parliament and Provincial legislatures. Supporters of political parties should be represented in proportion to the votes they cast. Not in Ontario and Canada! In the 2003 Ontario election, the Liberals took only 46% of the vote but obtained 70% of the seats in the legislature. This is not unusual with our electoral system. In 1990, the NDP had only 38% of the vote but governed with 57% of the seats. In 2003 in Ontario, on average, it took the Liberals only 29,000 votes to elect an MPP but it took the Conservatives 65,000 votes and the NDP 95,000 votes to elect each member.

**Voter Apathy**

2). In a real democracy, participation, like representation is crucial to the health of the system. You would think that people should participate in politics and especially in elections. Not in Ontario and Canada. While it improved a bit in 2006, Canadian voter
Turnout had plummeted to just 60 percent in 2004, (20 percent in a Toronto municipal by-election) and we found that Canada ranked 109th among 163 nations in voter turnout during the 1990s. Voter turnout also averaged just 60% in Ontario from 1980 to 2003. Our youth vote is abysmally low – only around 25%. If young people are not interested in voting, the future of democracy is indeed dim. A proportional electoral system will not change all that, but it would likely increase the motivation of voters to cast a ballot if every ballot counts.

**No Real Choice**

3.) In a real democracy, people would want to participate in elections because they would think their vote counts and they have a real choice. Not in Ontario and Canada. In a typical riding where there are between three and five parties running, the winner may only get 40 percent of the vote. Worse is the fact that many constituencies are considered “safe ridings” where only one or two parties usually have a chance of winning. Electors of smaller parties never have a chance of seeing the person, the party, or the issues they voted for represented in the legislature. They don’t have a real choice. They say that these people come to feel their vote is “wasted”. Ontario residents are champions in this sport. From 1980 to 2003, an average of 51% of Ontario voters did not elect their candidate and therefore gained no political representation. In countries with proportional systems like New Zealand, Germany and Scotland, only 5 to 7 percent of the votes are “wasted”. Here, in Canada, people get really turned off by our system and democracy suffers.

**Phony Majority Governments**

4). In a real democracy, it is understood that the majority rules but this is not the case in Ontario and Canada where people can be elected with much less than 50% of the vote and leading parties see their percent of the vote leveraged into a proportion of the seats far exceeding their proportion of the electoral support. Believe it or not, during the past fifty years, Canada has had only TWO federal governments elected by a majority of the voters (in 1958 and 1984). In Ontario, the situation is even more abysmal: 1937 was the last time a legitimate majority government was elected. All the rest have been “phony majorities” where the bigger parties see their number of seats rise well above their proportion of the votes. In New Brunswick in 1987, the McKenna Liberals swept 100
percent of the seats with only 60% of the vote. Federally, Chrétien was a champion of
the “phony majority”. In 1997 he won 57% of the seats with only 39 percent of the vote.
The accretion of power to the Prime Minister’s function still allowed him to govern as
though he had a democratic majority!

**Distorted Demographic Representation**
5). In a real democracy, all people should have a fair shot at being elected. A fairer
electoral system will in return enable citizens to benefit from a wider range of skills,
experience and knowledge in the general population which diversity will necessarily
enrich effective more inclusive coalitions. You would think especially that one half of the
population, that is women, would have an equal chance to become an MP. Not in Ontario
and Canada. To our embarrassment, only 21 percent of the present federal and Ontario
legislatures are women. Countries with proportional electoral systems like the
Scandinavian countries, Holland, Germany, Spain, and Belgium have between 32 and 45
percent women in their Lower Houses of parliament. Canada ranks 42nd on the global
scale of women elected to govern.

**Distorted Regional Representation of Parties**
6). In a real democracy, the geographic representation in Parliament and government
would be fairly proportionate to their standing in the regions. The different regions would
be reasonably well represented in the parties in which they have won votes. Well, as we
have seen, not in Canada. In the 1993 election, the Conservatives got many more votes
than the Bloc Québécois but they ended up getting only two seats while the Bloc won 54
and became the official opposition. In the most recent election, the Conservatives on the
Prairies won only twice as many votes as the Liberals but gained seven times as many
seats. And so it goes across the country. The Liberals are all but locked out in the West,
the Conservatives in Ontario and Quebec and the NDP and the Greens in Quebec. In
Ontario, the thinly represented Northern and Eastern regions feel estranged from the
power base around Toronto. Our federal and provincial systems suffer because there is
not an even balance of regional representatives in the party caucuses and cabinets where
the major political decisions are made.
Lack of Accountability

7). In a real democracy, the people who govern us, and their policies, are meant to be decided out in the open. You would think that the leadership and the governing coalitions would be chosen in public. Not in Ontario and Canada. Here, it is all done behind closed doors hidden in party meetings, behind the scenes. Even when the coalitions are made in public, as with P. McKay in the former Progressive Conservative party, they are unmade behind everyone’s backs in private. Open coalition making with contracts between partners allows citizens to see what is happening to their votes and obliges governments to pay more attention to the will of the electors.

Outmoded Political Management

8). A democracy should learn. You would want it to be modern, to keep up-to-date. Not in Canada. We are one of only three Western democracies still using a two party electoral system originally invented in the 12th century. Most other leading democracies have moved on. Let’s get with it.

C. Some Suggestions and Priority Objectives

During the years we in the National Capital Region of Fair Vote Canada have been studying the need to reform our electoral systems, we have come to several joint conclusions we would like to share with the Citizens’ Assembly.

1). We have become more and more convinced that our present, First-Past-The-Post, winner-takes-all voting system does a terrible disservice to adapting our political system to current realities. It does not represent the votes of the electors. It increases voter apathy and distrust because, from election to election, blocs of the electorate do not see themselves fairly and faithfully reflected in the legislature. This is particularly true of smaller and younger parties, native peoples, women, youth, and minorities and all sorts of social categories. It allows parties with the support of only a minority of the population to govern as though they were a majority. In addition, the continuing jousting between the two traditional parties is stopping healthy change and reform in all our political institutions – starting with Parliament.
2). Through our observations we have come to understand that there are two factors impeding electoral reform. The first is the desire of the Liberals and Conservatives, especially at the federal level, to maintain their political hegemony by manipulating a system they know how to manage. The same thing can be said of the provincial NDP in Manitoba, Saskatchewan and British Columbia. The main exceptions are parties which, even after having won the majority of votes, have been kept out of power because of the electoral system – as was the case with Liberal provincial governments in Ontario, British Columbia, and Quebec. Generally speaking, parties with access to power do not want to change the system that gives it to them. But, in so doing, the very politicians who are meant to be leading the country toward the future are keeping it in the past without any thought for the good of the citizens. It never seems to enter the heads of politicians that each party sustains great losses in one region or another due to the unfair voting system. Ideally, the elected representatives should represent the electors!

The second reason is related to the first. Up until the past year, the political media has not drawn the unfairness of the electoral system to public attention because they too were convinced that the parties in power would never allow electoral reform; therefore, it was not a news topic. Why cover a non-topic, they ask themselves. Although the editorial policy of the Globe and Mail has long supported electoral reform, it is only since the 2006 federal election that a number of senior journalists such as Doug Fisher, Roy MacGregor and John Ibbitson have started to explore the subject. It is precisely because of the recalcitrance of the politicians and the media to address the reform issue that the role of the Ontario Citizens’ Assembly is so crucial in acting for electors.

3). When approaching electoral reform, we have found that it is most rewarding to start first by defining our political values and drawing from them a set of principles that should guide the design of a new institutional process for our elections. In this context, we would like to stress that we firmly support the set of principles recommended by the National Council of Fair Vote Canada.
4). For ourselves, our practical objectives are to ensure that: the allotment of legislative seats closely reflects the popular vote; women and minorities are fairly represented; elected representatives reflect the diverse political opinions in each of the regions; and we be governed by representative, democratic majorities. There are, however, few perfect solutions. When you are designing such things as proportions of compensatory seats, the number and size of regions, the types of party lists, and the size of the legislature, there are so many variables and balancing considerations that the quest for the perfect can be the enemy of the good. We recognize the difficult balancing act that is required to maximize both leadership and representation, both stability and equity. Guided by your values and principles, we would urge you to work for consensus on a new system that has good, practical antecedents and is likely to work best for Ontario, even if it does not suit every person’s sense of perfection. You should, therefore, include in your recommendations that any new system must be reviewed after two elections.

5). As residents of the Eastern Ontario and the Ottawa region we also have region-specific goals. One is to make sure that Francophones are adequately represented both as candidates for elections and as elected representatives in the Ontario legislature. There would appear to be several ways to attain this objective, but comparative experience would seem to indicate that if we are going to have proportional representation, we will require multi-member regional constituencies with sufficient seats so that parties will nominate a variety of candidates to reflect the diversity of this region’s population. We hope the Assembly will give due consideration to this concern, as well as to the many others above which we have tried to bring to your attention.