

Would result in radical change at Queen's Park

Ontarians to vote on new electoral system

TORONTO (CP) — Ontario voters will decide in the October election whether to adopt a revamped electoral system that advocates say will give the province a more co-operative government and could prompt electoral change across the country.

A citizens' assembly, appointed by the government last year, overwhelmingly decided Sunday that the referendum question put to voters in the Oct. 10 election should ask whether they want to adopt the system used in Germany and New Zealand called "mixed member proportional."

"We felt the number of seats a party wins should more reflect the popular vote that they received," said Mayte Darraidou, an assembly member from Toronto.

"We felt that Ontario had been through several governments where they received a majority of the seats but did not receive a majority of the votes. We wanted to change that."

Under the proposed system, voters would have two choices on a ballot — one for a local representative and another for a political party.

The number of seats in the legislature would swell from 103 to 129 — 90 politicians would be elected in enlarged ridings across the province using the current first-

past-the-post system and another 39 would be appointed by parties from a public list of candidates according to the percentage of popular vote they received.

The mixed member system means traditional fringe parties like the Green Party that get more than 3 per cent of the vote — but not enough to elect candidates in ridings — would have a better chance of having at least one seat in the legislature.

If Ontario voters decided to adopt the system, the province would likely have fewer single-party majority governments but would rather encourage parties to create majorities through coalitions.

It will give us "a more co-operative government," said Pat Miller, a Toronto-area member of the assembly.

"It's a government with some continuity between elections that will save some of the waste that there's been when we've seen rapid change from one government to another," she said.

The 103-member assembly endorsed the system 94 votes to 8 with one member absent. Edmund James, one of the few members who voted to stick with the status quo, said more work should be done to empower backbenchers rather than tinkering with how they are elected.

"Political reform would have suited me," he said.

The question now is whether Ontarians will agree and whether there will be enough money provided by the government to adequately educate voters about their choices before the referendum on Oct. 10.

Marie Bountrogianni, minister responsible for democratic renewal, said in a statement the government will "respect the decision" of Ontario voters and is committed to ensuring people can make an informed decision.

"To do this, sufficient funds will be made available to educate the public on the various options," she said.

Critics worry the proposal is destined to fail because the government has set the bar at a 60 per cent majority needed to change the current voting system, with more than 50 per cent of ballots needing to be cast in at least 64 ridings.

The October referendum will be Ontario's fifth in its history — the last one occurred in 1921 on the subject of alcohol prohibition.

Both British Columbia and Prince Edward Island held referendums on electoral reform in 2005 but neither won enough support to pass. Quebec is in the process of reviewing its election process and the B.C. government has promised to hold a second referendum on the electoral process in 2009.

