

Proposal could see number of Ontario seats rise dramatically in Parliament

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A federal proposal to add seats to the House of Commons to account for Canada's growing population could swell Ontario's Legislature to 120 seats and eventually to 130 and more.

Prime Minister Stephen Harper's Conservative government is expected to roll out a democratic reform package before recessing this summer and if those plans pan out new legislation would add an extra 22 seats to the nation's Parliament in fairly short order.

That would keep a campaign promise to increase the number of MPs in Alberta, British Columbia and Ontario - which have all seen significant population growth over the past five years. Ontario law loosely links federal and provincial riding boundaries in southern Ontario, though boundaries are different in 11 northern ridings.

The federal legislation that will reportedly increase seat totals to match population growth would also add dozens of new seats to Ontario's Legislature over the next decade to 30 years. However, Ontario Intergovernmental Affairs Minister Marie Bountrogianni told Osprey News that even if the feds change boundaries this summer, the province won't meddle with current electoral boundaries just six months before a provincial election.

"The proposed legislation that is cited in the newspapers will not affect the boundaries in the upcoming October election," Bountrogianni said. Any potential change wouldn't impact Ontario's Legislature until 2012. That doesn't mean the status quo will prevail and voters will see real and potential change to riding boundaries this fall.

In 2003, when Premier Dalton McGuinty's Liberals won power, 103 MPPs were elected to represent ridings across the province. Two year later, the Liberals amended electoral legislation to keep their own promise to maintain the number of northern seats at 11. That will increase the total number of MPPs and seats in the provincial Legislature to 107 in the upcoming, Oct. 10 provincial election.

The proposed federal realignment would immediately add an additional 13 seats for a total of 120 in subsequent elections with additional seats being added every ten years to account for population growth. Most would be added to urban and high growth areas around in the Greater Toronto Area including Peel, York, Halton, Durham as well as Simcoe, although other higher than average growth regions include Muskoka, Kawartha Lakes, Haliburton, Waterloo, Dufferin, Peterborough and Niagara.

Meanwhile, voters in this province will also be asked this fall to consider dramatic electoral changes proposed by The Ontario Citizens' Assembly on Electoral Reform. The Assembly is scheduled to issue a final report to Bountrogianni on May 15 that will recommend Ontario adopt a new system to elect MPPs and political parties at Queen's Park.

That recommendation will initiate a referendum vote this fall to coincide with the Oct. 10 provincial election which will ask voters to choose between the current electoral system and an alternative system called Mixed Member Proportional. Under a Mixed Member Proportional system, voters would cast votes on ballots both for a local MPP and their preferred political party and the Legislature would expand to 129 seats.

Bountrogianni said any federal changes will be put on hold at least until Ontario voters decide whether or not they want what may be fundamental change to this province's electoral system. "It wouldn't make any sense to think about that now given we have a citizen's assembly and they have come up with a recommendation that would have more seats and if this is passed, that's what we'll go to in 2008," she said.