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Ontario voters could choose electoral reform

TORONTO (CP) — Ontario voters may get some significant power in October that could radically change the way politicians are elected, but critics say the public shouldn't get its hopes up because the government has set up the electoral-reform process to fail.

Premier Dalton McGuinty vowed Wednesday that citizens will face no government interference in deciding if the electoral system needs a tune-up and said he looks forward to a report by the Citizens' Assembly on Electoral Reform, which is deliberating whether there's a better way to elect politicians.

The group of 103 randomly-selected citizens is studying a system called mixed member proportional, which would see voters mark two ballot boxes — one for a local representative and one for a political party.

They'll vote next weekend on whether the new system should be presented to the public in a referendum question on Oct. 10, election day. McGuinty said he won't try to influence voters and will accept change if that's what the public wants.

"I think it's really important that the people of Ontario know they have a completely free hand in making a determination as to the best system they want," McGuinty said.

"I'll live with any arrangement chosen by the people I work for."

Supporters of the proportional system say it would usher in a more fair, inclusive process that would make the popular vote better reflect the distribution of seats in the legislature, and help introduce more women and minorities to government.

A proportional system would also let people choose which party they want to run the province while still being able to support another party to represent their local riding.

Prof. Graham White of the University of Toronto said the current system does have some positives, like simplicity for voters and the stability of majority governments, but he added that he would vote for change in a referendum.

While majority governments are stable, they also give far too much power to those in control, he said.

"(A minority government) means our duly-elected representatives will actually have a say in governing the province, whereas (now) frankly, the legislature really doesn't have a lot of clout."

Conservative Leader John Tory said he thinks the current system has served the public well and there are better ways to improve how politicians work.

"There's inadequate scrutiny over public expenditures, the behaviour and productivity of the (legislature) is abysmal and I think the average (politician) feels their role has been substantially diminished — over a period of many years, under many different governments," Tory said.

"Parliamentary reform would be something the public would be much more interested in seeing, before they start seeing big changes in how we elect people."

New Democrat Michael Prue said he's not confident the system will change, even if the public supports it.

The government wants at least 60 per cent support for electoral change, a standard Prue said proves that the process has been set up to fail.

"It is disgraceful . . . the 60 per cent (threshold) is an exercise to ensure whatever they recommend does not happen," he said, pointing out that most other referendums in the province and the country only sought a 50-per-cent-plus-one majority.

