

# More MPPs could be headed to Queen's Park

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Ontarians might be voting this October on a new electoral system that could send as many as two dozen additional MPPs to Queen's Park.

The Ontario Citizens' Assembly (OCA), an independent group established by the Liberals in 2006 to explore the issue of electoral reform, decided this weekend that a mixed member proportional system - similar to what exists in Germany and New Zealand - would be the alternative to the province's 200-year-old "first past the post" system if a referendum takes place this fall.

"It's a new way of thinking about representation," said Barry Koen- Butt, director of communications for the Citizens' Assembly Secretariat. Under such a system, Ontarians would have two votes on their ballots: one for their riding's MPP, and one for the political party of their choice. Elections Ontario would first use the party vote to determine what percentage of seats each party is given at Queen's Park, said Koen-Butt.

A party like the NDP, which received 14 per cent of the popular vote in the 2003 election but only seven seats, would have their seat count "topped up" with MPPs from closed lists, so that their representation more accurately reflects the popular vote, said Koen- Butt.

But to make those numbers work, the number of MPPs would likely jump to 129 - one short of what existed in Ontario before former Premier Mike Harris cut the number of seats in the 1990s, to better match federal riding boundaries. While the number of individual ridings in Ontario would drop from 103 to about 90, an additional 39 MPPs would be elected from the party lists, said Koen-Butt.

In other countries, those MPPs are generally focused more on provincial or regional issues since they don't serve specific constituencies, said Koen-Butt. From Oshawa to the Cornwall area, there would likely be three fewer ridings, he added. "They (the OCA) still have a few weeks to fine tune those numbers, " said Koen-Butt. "I don't anticipate those numbers changing, because they seem happy with it - but it ain't over until it's over." Parties would also have to break a three per cent threshold in popular support before receiving seats under the system, said Koen- Butt.

Chris Savard, who was acclaimed as the local Progressive Conservative candidate last October, felt it was "a little premature" to take a stance either for or against a mixed member system before the OCA submitted its final report on May 15. He did express concern that eastern Ontario's clout could be reduced if the number of MPPs at Queen's Park went up. "It's a sizable number, which comes at a sizable cost," said Savard. "I think there is a lot of merit to marrying . . . the provincial and federal boundaries."

Liberal MPP Jim Brownell could not be reached for comment. The OCA will take one last look at the two options, before voting on whether or not to send the issue to a referendum, during its next meeting on April 14-15.

Any change to the first past the post system would then go into effect for the next election - likely in 2011, but possibly sooner if the province votes in a minority government, said Koen-Butt.

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