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Citizens’ assembly poised to pick electoral reform

Ontario’s current system of choosing a government is more than 200 years old

By James Wallace
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THE ONTARIO CITIZENS’ ASSEMBLY on Electoral Reform is poised this weekend to recommend the province adopt a new system to elect MPPs and political parties at Queen’s Park.

Assembly members are almost certain to approve a “Mixed Member Proportional” system that in future would see voters choose both a local MPP to represent them in Ontario’s Legislature and a preferred political party.

The assembly will vote on the new system today and approve a draft report detailing changes to Ontario’s 200-plus-year-old electoral system tomorrow and will issue a final report and recommendation to the government on May 15.

“Should they recommend that system, they are hoping their final report will make it clear to the people of Ontario just why they chose it and how it looks in total,” Assembly Chair George Thomson, who lives on Howe Island, told Osprey News.

If the final report recommends change as expected, Ontario’s Liberal government intends to pass referendum legislation that would ask voters this fall to approve or reject the new system.

Ontario currently uses what is called
a "First Past the
Post" electoral sys-
tem where individ-
ual MPPs run in lo-
cal ridings and the
party that elects
the most wins power
and runs the gov-
ernment.

U n d e r t h e
"Mixed Member
Proportional" sys-
tem, every ballot
would require two
votes - one for a lo-
cal MPP and one for
a political party.

Riding residents could, for example,
vote for a Conservative MPP locally but
support the Green Party with the sec-
ond vote on their ballot.

Ontario's electoral map would be re-
drawn and the legislature expanded to
129 seats from the current 103.

That would include 90 directly elected
local MPPs.

However, seat totals in the legislature
would also be divided up according to
the popular or second vote on the ballot.

For example, if the Liberals won 40
per cent of the popular vote, they would
be awarded 40 per cent of the seats in the
legislature.

There would be an additional 39 seats
filled by "list" candidates, MPPs chosen
by the political parties themselves.

Assembly members have been study-
ing electoral reform since last fall and
during the deliberation phase of the
meetings, decided that Ontario's elec-
toral system should have three objec-
tives.

It must ensure voters have strong lo-
cal representation, that voters have
more choice in who represents them
and that the makeup of the legislature
reflects the will of the people.

Under the Mixed Member Proportion-
al system being considered, the Green
Party, for example, would win 10 per
cent of the seats in the legislature if
they won 10 per cent of the popular
vote, even if they failed to win a sin-
gle MPP at the rid-
ing level. Coalition
and minority gov-
ernments would be
far more likely out-
comes at election
time.

Premier Dalton
McGuinty
promised during
the last election campaign to review
electoral reform. The assembly's report
will fulfill that promise.

NDP leader Howard Hampton and his
party support changing to the new sys-

tem and admit it could help his party

hold more seats in the Legislature.

Hammond said a number of European
countries, including France and Ger-
many, have similar proportional sys-
tems and suggests they create govern-
ments that more fairly reflect voter
intentions.

"Yes, it leads to more coalition gover-
ments and more consensus building but
we think that's a good thing," he said.

Conservative leader John Tory said
he'll wait until he's had a chance to read the report and see the ballot question the Liberal put on the referendum for the Oct. 10 vote.

His caucus members privately say they have a number of concerns about the proposed system, including the creation of “two-tier” MPPs and a succession of ineffective minority governments.

Tory hinted his party may eventually have a problem with the expected recommendation.

“I believe it is more important that we reform the way Parliament works rather than beginning with the way that we elect people here,” he said.

“I think you could change the way we elect people here to any method you want but if you don’t change the way this place functions, give some real responsibility back to MPPs especially as an overseer of spending and other activities of government, then it won’t matter.”

“You can elect them any way you like and it won’t matter if the way this place works stays the same which in my view is dysfunctional and is ineffective relative to what it used to be and what it should be,” Tory said.

*James Wallace is Queen’s Park bureau chief for Osprey News.*