

Changing the way we vote

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If the Citizens' Assembly on Electoral Reform follows through on its preliminary decision on how to best change Ontario's voting system, we could be in for another decision during the October 10 provincial election. The assembly, a group of 103 randomly selected voters, was charged with the task of looking at the current "first past the post" electoral system and deciding if it needs tweaking, or a wholesale change.

Considering the current system in place was implemented when the horse was the main form of transportation and women weren't even allowed to vote, it is high time it was reviewed. In preliminary deliberations, the assembly has seemed to be strongly in favour of changing the electoral system to something called "mixed-member proportional representation." In this system, riding candidates are elected using the current voting procedure, but a separate ballot is held for a preferred political party.

For example, people here in Renfrew-Nipissing-Pembroke would have the option of returning sitting MPP John Yakabuski to Queen's Park, while at the same time indicating they prefer John Tory's Progressive Conservative party to lead the province (hypothetically). Or they could vote for someone other than Yakabuski and vote to keep the Dalton McGuinty Liberals in power.

You get the picture. The political parties are then allocated seats based on the percentage of votes they receive (i.e. popular vote). There is also an option on the table called a "single transferable vote," in which voters rank their candidates in numerical order. A voter's second choice is enacted if their first choice has too few votes to be elected, or has already been chosen.

This system continues until all seats have been allocated, and is designed to prevent 'strategic voting' and avoid wasted votes. Pembroke's Maureen Grace, a member of the citizens' assembly, has gone on record as favouring the single transferable vote option, but she was in the minority as three-quarters of her peers on the assembly seem to be leaning toward mixed-member proportional representation.

It is interesting to note that both are changes from the traditional "first past the post" system we have had for well over a century. Which system the citizens' assembly finally approves - if it indeed represents a change from the current system - would then be ratified by the general public in a referendum during the Oct. 10 election. In order to pass, it would require 60 per cent (plus one vote) support to change from the status quo.

We want fair representation? The Citizens' Assembly is obviously taking that sentiment to heart.

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