

Electoral system needs to evolve

Re: Do we want what we think we want? — April 2.

I was somewhat disappointed with the Sudbury Star's editorial position on electoral reform.

Rather than arguing that the current electoral system has given us stable governments and therefore should not be tampered with, one should argue that proportional representation would give us a legislative assembly that is more reflective of the will of the population.

During the 2003 election campaign, Liberal leader Dalton McGuinty promised to look into modernizing the electoral system and he fulfilled his promise by setting up a Citizen's Assembly to recommend either the status quo or changes in the electoral process. It now appears that the 102 members of the assembly, after province-wide public consultations and numerous meetings, are about to propose a major change in the way we elect our provincial governments.

On May 15, the assembly will submit a report that recommends an electoral system called mixed-member proportional and the proposal will be voted on by referendum on Oct. 10 at the same time as the general election.

The mixed-member proportional system is simple. We would elect 90 members from ridings across the province, as we do presently,

where only a simple plurality is needed. An additional 39 seats would be added and members would be named from party lists according to the popular vote.

This system allows the citizen to vote for the candidate and the party of his choice.

While this proposal may provide us with the occasional minority government, it is the same system currently in use in Germany and New Zealand and those countries have had stable governments in the recent past. In fact, under the proposed system we would have only 30 per cent of the members elected via a party list, while in New Zealand and Germany, 50 per cent of the members are chosen through the party list.

Another argument that the Star uses to condemn proportional representation is the need to keep our electoral system simple. You are underestimating the public's ability to learn new systems. Anybody who has filled out an income tax form, applied for a mortgage or installed new software on a computer surely can learn to vote twice, once for the member and once for the party.

Electing a government is important enough that improvements should not be stopped simply because the alternative is too complex.

The current system has given us anomalies throughout the years. A few recent

examples will suffice.

► In 1987, New Brunswickers voted 60 per cent in favour of the Liberals but because of the distribution of votes, 100 per cent of the seats were Liberal ones, leaving 40 per cent of the population effectively without a single voice in the provincial assembly.

► During the 1993 federal elections, the Progressive Conservatives were decimated when only two MPs were elected; (0.7 per cent of the seats) while obtaining 16 per cent of the vote.

► In the 1998 Quebec elections, the PQ received only 43 per cent of the vote but formed a majority government with 62 per cent of the seats. Meanwhile, the Liberals with more votes, 44 per cent, found themselves in the opposition with 38 per cent of the seats. The real losers in that election however were the people who voted ADQ. The party, with 11 per cent of the popular vote, managed to get only one member elected — its leader, Mario Dumont.

Our electoral system has evolved since its inception. Franchising non-land owners, natives and women must have been seen as radical at the time. Proportional representation is the next logical step in our democratic system.

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