

No fringe benefits

Proposed electoral system for Ontario has more drawbacks than advantages



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National Affairs

Next October, Ontario voters — at least, those who care enough to vote — will be traipsing off to the polls to turn thumbs up or thumbs down on Liberal Premier Dalton McGuinty.

Those same voters will also have the chance to vote in a referendum — the first one in Ontario since Prohibition in 1921 — on whether to retain our current electoral system or adopt something called mixed member proportional, or MMP.

Let's hope they keep what we have. Why? Because the new system — a modified version of PR, or proportional representation — would result in perpetual minority governments, where minor parties would wield far more power than the electorate meant them to have.

And, despite constant claims to the contrary from PR advocates, the new system would be less democratic.

First, the details.

You may recall that one of the many promises McGuinty made in the 2003 election — one of the few he has actually kept — is to have a look at electoral reform. He did impose fixed election dates, however, without any meaningful public notice or debate, a shameful way to bring about electoral reform.

So at least this time, acting on the recommendations of the so-called Ontario Citizen's Assembly — which voted 94-8 in favor of replacing our current "first-past-the-post" system — Ontarians will get to vote on whether to keep the old system or bring in a new one. A 60 per cent approval vote is needed for change.

Here's how the new one would work — or not work — depending upon your point of view.

Instead of the current 107 seats after redistribution this fall — all of them represented by a single MPP elected directly by the voters in each riding — there would be

129 MPPs at Queen's Park. That's an extra 22 politicians, reason enough by itself to be wary of the proposal.

It gets worse, however. Only 90 of those "representatives" would be chosen directly by voters from newly created, larger ridings. The remaining 29 "representatives" would be picked from a list

compiled by party backroom operatives, based on the overall percentage of their party's vote. In other words, your direct vote will be watered down because the ridings will be expanded, and you won't have any direct say at all on almost 30 per cent of the politicians who would purportedly be representing you at Queen's Park.

WHILE IT MAY SEEM WRONG ON THE SURFACE TO DECLARE A MAJORITY GOVERNMENT FOR A PARTY THAT WON LESS THAN THE MAJORITY OF VOTES ... IT'S STILL A LOT FAIRER THAN THIS NEW PROPOSAL WOULD BE.

The main argument made by those who don't like our current system — where the candidate with the most votes wins — is that governments are given "majorities" even though they do not win a majority of the votes cast.

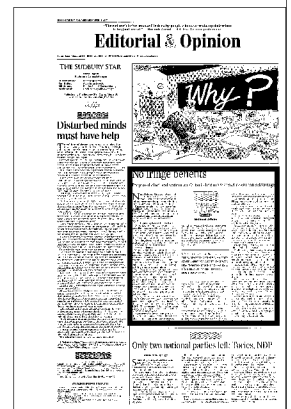
Never mind that the system has worked — and worked rather well, actually — for some 200 years or so in Canada and many other countries in the world.

The forces of change, mainly those who want to see their fringe views given more muscle, are pushing for this "reform" because they know the major parties would be perpetually handcuffed, forced into making backroom political deals in order to keep their governments

afloat. Beats me how this would be an improvement over the current system.

But never mind the spurious claims of PR supporters who say it's more democratic and fairer.

Here's a practical example of what could happen in Ontario if we adopted the New Zealand model for our Legislature.



The Sudbury Star (Sudbury,ON)		Order/Commande
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In the 1996 New Zealand election, it took six weeks to wheel and deal their way to a coalition government. (That coalition lasted two years.)

As Eric Crampton, a University of Canterbury professor in New Zealand recently wrote, "Voters did not know for a-month-and-a-half who would form the government, and ultimately had no say in the matter. Why is it fairer to voters that governments be formed by back-room deals subsequent to elections?"

The answer, of course, is that it isn't fairer. Quite the opposite.

While it may seem wrong on the sur-

face to declare a majority government for a party that won less than the majority of the votes — which almost always happens in our system — it's still a lot fairer than this new proposal would be.

Another thing often overlooked by the critics of our current system is the fact that whomever wins each riding, they're elected to represent "all" of the people in that riding, not just those who voted for them.

This is not a small matter. I can't remember the last time I lived in a riding where I voted for a winner, but even so, the winning politician represents my

interests in the legislature every bit as he or she represents those who endorsed that particular party.

What's more, if a partisan politician was stupid enough to ignore all those who didn't vote for him — usually the majority — his chances or re-election would be pretty weak.

You'll hear a lot over the next little while about how much better proportional representation would be.

Don't buy it. It's a con job.

■ Read Claire Hoy every Wednesday in The Sudbury Star.