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Make referendum question public: opposition

TORONTO (CP) — The referendum question on changing Ontario's electoral system should be forced to stand the scrutiny of the legislature and shouldn't be written by the Liberal cabinet behind closed doors, opposition politicians said Wednesday.

Premier Dalton McGuinty said the question that will be put to voters in October's election will be clear and fair, with no surprises.

The referendum legislation, passed this week, dictates that cabinet will devise the question.

But McGuinty said that's still up in the air.

"It may very well be that we're going to have some independent authority assume responsibility for that," he said.

Both New Democrats and Conservatives say adding some form of propor-

tional representation is too important and its implications should be spelled out clearly to Ontario voters before they decide in October.

New Democrat Michael Prue said both British Columbia and Prince Edward Island debated their recent referendum questions on electoral reform in the legislature.

"Here in Ontario, it's done in secret, in cabinet and it will be imposed upon the citizens whether it is fair or not," Prue said. "Look at some of the referenda that have been held. You get a biased question that twigs the people to vote a certain way. It should be debated in the legislature."

A government-appointed citizens' assembly is recommending Ontario voters decide in October whether to adopt a new electoral system that would see 90

politicians elected in enlarged ridings and another 39 who would be appointed from a party list according to the popular vote.

The system, which is in place in New Zealand and Germany, gives a greater voice to smaller parties who win a substantial percentage of the popular vote and encourages co-operative government rather than single-party majorities.

Marie Bountrogianni, minister responsible for democratic renewal, admitted the government could write the referendum question in a biased way but vowed the Liberals won't do that.

"The premier is very dedicated to this issue and I'm sure he'll do it in a way that is ethical," she said. "(The question) will be simple, clear, concise. As the premier has told me, if my mother can't understand it, we're not doing it."

