

Opposition decries closed-door debate

Parties say legislature should write fall referendum question

TORONTO (CP) — The referendum question on changing Ontario's electoral system should stand up to 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.

"We'll have a question that is very clear for people to consider on the ballot," McGuinty said. "It may very well be that

we're going to have some independent authority assume responsibility for that."

But both New Democrats and Conservatives say adding some form of proportional representation is too important to fall victim to partisan politics and its implications should be spelled out clearly to Ontario voters well before the election.

Both British Columbia and Prince Edward Island debated their recent referendum questions on electoral reform in the legislature, and NDP Leader Howard Hampton said Ontario should be no different.

The citizens' assembly that recommended the new electoral system should write the question which should then be approved by the legislature,

Hampton said.

"To now have that referendum question set behind closed doors by a cabinet that has already tried to stack the deck against electoral reform, I think is outrageous," Hampton said.

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 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.

The Liberals have set the bar at 60 per cent majority needed to change the current voting system, with more than 50 per cent of ballots needing to be cast in at least 64 ridings.

Marie Bountrogianni, minister responsible for democratic renewal, admitted cabinet 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."

