

Election head has financial carte blanche for fall vote

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The chief electoral officer has an unlimited budget to educate the public on electoral reform as Ontario faces its first referendum since 1921, the minister responsible for democratic renewal said Tuesday.

The government is introducing legislation today to make it easier for voters to cast their ballots, and tasks Ontario's chief electoral officer John Hollins with helping the public to understand the referendum question on the mixed-member proportional voting system it proposes.

"This (legislation) would enable the chief elections officer to have a very well-funded public education campaign to let people know about the status quo, as well as mixed member proportionality, " Marie Bountrogianni said in an interview. She said Hollins will determine the cost of the education campaign and won't be given a maximum he can spend.

"We know he will be reasonable," Bountrogianni said. "We also think it's very important to fund a very good campaign because in British Columbia that was one of the challenges they had, many people weren't quite sure what they were voting for in the referendum and we want to ensure that people do know what they're voting for at the polls."

Fair Vote Canada has said the province must put at least \$13 million into the education campaign to ensure people are well- informed. The legislation also recommends that the deadline for voting be pushed back by one hour, and that the number of advance-polling days be increased from six to 13.

The legislation also requires that voters show ID before marking their ballot. Under the current system, anyone can theoretically show up to a polling station and could vote if they provided a name that's on the list.

News of the legislation took Hollins by surprise – he first learned some of the details after speaking with The Canadian Press. "I guess we're excited that something's coming forward in the form of a bill and we're really interested to see what the bill says," Hollins said.

He admitted he has little grasp on how prepared the public is for a referendum. "I have no idea, I have no sense at all, this is so far off my radar screen," he said. Conservative John Tory said he was disappointed that the opposition was not consulted in amending the Elections Act.

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