

Referendum half-hearted

Brantford Expositor (ON)
Wed 14 Feb 2007
Page: A10
Section: Opinion
Byline:
Source:
Edition:
Length: 602 words
Illustration:

The Ontario Liberal government's efforts to reform the electoral system should be taken as seriously as Elmer Fudd at a rabbits' rights conference. Starting Saturday the Citizens' Assembly on Electoral Reform will begin deliberations on what type of alternative electoral system they will recommend to Ontarians in a referendum to be held along with the provincial election in October.

But for Ontario to adopt a new system, more than 60 per cent of the declining number of voters who still opt to vote would have to endorse the change. Given the high threshold and the limited time voters would have to familiarize themselves with any proposed system, the process seems designed to fail.

After all, when was the last time a ruling government changed the system to its disadvantage? Never mind that voter participation is in a freefall and the legitimacy of democracy is threatened. The voter turnout of 56.9 per cent of eligible voters for the Ontario election in 2003 marked the lowest in the nine elections since 1975 when 67.8 per cent voted.

Ontario's Minister for Democratic Renewal Marie Bountrogianni defended the 60 per cent mark, saying such a majority is necessary to change the electoral system. "It deserves a strong majority," she said last week. Funny, the Clarity Act has established that a majority strong enough to pull Canada apart in any future Quebec referendum on sovereignty does not have to meet the 60 per cent mark.

But change to Ontario's electoral system that might end the Liberal party's or any other party's majority rule - that needs a real mandate. So when was the last time 60 per cent of Ontario voters agreed on anything?

Dalton McGuinty won more than 70 per cent of the seats with just 46.4 per cent of the vote in 2003. In 1990, Bob Rae's NDP won 57 per cent of the seats with 37.6 per cent of the vote. The last time an Ontario government came close to 60 was back in 1929 when George Howard Ferguson's Conservatives captured 58.8 per cent of the vote. The last time a government got more than half the votes was in 1937 when Liberal Mitchell Hepburn won re-election.

But 60 per cent? No, every decision in Ontario's history was made by a government elected with less than 60 per cent of the vote. So with a huge electoral hurdle, very little time and a budget estimated at \$6 million to educate Ontarians on any recommended system, the prospects for change seem slim.

But the experience of B.C. in 2005 offers some hope for those disenchanted with the current system. B.C. also held a vote along with a provincial election on whether the province would adopt the single transferable vote (STV) system. To pass, 60 per cent of voters would have had to approve it, as well as more than half of the voters in 60 per cent of the ridings.

All but two ridings voted in favour of the new system and the total votes fell just short at 57.69 per cent. The change was nearly approved, despite the widespread complaint that many voters were not familiar with or did not understand the proposed system. They just wanted change and they almost got it.

Since the vote was non-binding, the B.C. government could have chosen to implement the clear majority's wishes anyway, but decided against doing so. Evidently, more than 50 per cent only defines the majority sometimes. But the 50 per cent margin seems especially appropriate for Ontario, given that the effort to offer Ontarians the potential for change is half-assed at best.