

Critics call electoral reform referendum an 'elegant ruse'

Citizens need more education on the issue, voting group says

TORONTO (CP) — Ontario's coming referendum on whether to overhaul the province's electoral system is an "elegant ruse" because it is designed to fail, critics said Monday.

The government hasn't set aside enough money for TV or radio ads to educate people about the referendum in October's provincial election, and has set the bar too high by requiring a 60 per cent majority to change the current voting system, a steady stream of critics told a legislative committee.

"This proposal, if you allow it to go through, is going to create such a firestorm at the ground level with citizens of this province that you will not want to reap that whirlwind," former Conservative MP Patrick Boyer told the committee.

"There is a genuine risk of this being seen as a most elegant ruse."

The Liberal government has formed a citizens' group to examine alternatives to Ontario's electoral system, which could include proportional representation to bring election results in line with the popular vote.

The group's recommendations will form the basis of a referendum question to be put to voters in the October election. Voters will be asked if they want to change the current system, but the government says it won't make any changes unless 60 per cent vote in favour.

The prohibition of alcohol and the conscription of soldiers in the Second World War were all approved by a simple majority, Boyer said,

and electoral reform should be no different.

"The government wants to give the appearance of democratic renewal but denies it substance," Boyer said.

Others said if the government were truly serious about electoral reform, it would commit at least \$13 million to a public education campaign about the referendum.

Joe Murray, chairman of Fair Vote Ontario, said the government has only talked about spending \$6 million on a public education campaign, which doesn't cover the cost of TV or radio ads.

The British Columbia government spent that much on flyers when it held a sim-

ilar referendum, and Murray said most people didn't know about the referendum when they went to vote.

"We think there is a danger that Ontarians might go to a referendum without knowing that it existed or what they're voting on," he said.

Marie Bountrogianni, minister responsible for democratic renewal, wouldn't say how much the province will spend on a public education campaign, but said Ontario will learn from B.C.'s experience.

"People will know — if they're paying attention — what they're voting for," Bountrogianni said in an interview.

The 60 per cent threshold is necessary because the government is looking at fundamentally changing the only election system people have known, Bountrogianni said.

Other countries have voted overwhelmingly in favour of change, and nothing is stopping Ontario residents from doing likewise, she said.

"It deserves a strong majority."

But others say setting the bar so high actually disen-

franchises those who want change. Dennis Pilon, assistant professor of political science at the University of Victoria, said it means people who vote against reform carry more weight than those who vote for it.

"It inflates the voting power of those opposed to change while diluting the voting power of those seeking change," said Pilon, adding other countries around the world have brought in electoral reform on the strength of a simple majority.

Leah Casselman, head of the Ontario Public Service Employees' Union, said the current system of "first-past-the-post" is undemocratic and means there are fewer women and visible minorities in politics.

Ontario is ripe for electoral change and the province shouldn't be standing in the way, she said.

"A super-double majority is not a standard we apply to other legislation," Casselman told the committee. "Why, then, is it being proposed here?"

