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Reform not a dirty word

On Monday evening, a provincially created panel on electoral reform made a stop in Timmins. The group of 104 Ontario residents has been established to write a report recommending the best way to elect our provincial representatives.

The panel is holding community meetings in 37 areas. The object is to answer questions, elicit suggestions and hear comments from voters about their views.

The concept of electoral reform can be pretty scary — especially because nothing will change before a province-wide referendum on the issue is held, and general wisdom has it that no one likes going to the polls unless there is no other option.

In the case of electoral reform, there really isn't any other option. Like it or not, the traditional parliamentary "first past the post" system used by Great Britain and most of the Commonwealth is on its way out. Several other provinces and the federal government are preparing studies similar to Ontario's.

We vote for one representative in our riding, and the person with the most votes — the first candidate to "pass the post" — is elected, even if the majority of voters chose someone else. Most of the time, this method of voting creates a majority government.

At a local level, as most voters have realized, the majority doesn't always rule. With four or more parties competing in each constituency, it's highly unusual for the winner to be elected with 50 per cent of the vote. It's usually closer to 30 per cent.

When overall voting patterns are taken into account, the skew created by the system is even more obvious. The popular vote is very rarely reflected in the makeup of parliament.

The New Democratic Party is a good example of this. They usually garner a handful of seats — but the proportion of votes they receive is much greater.

Many people will remember watching the results come in from the 1997 general election. The Liberals won 99 of Ontario's 101 seats, solidifying a majority government for the party.

The whole province had turned red — yet a little more than 50 per cent of Ontario voters had chosen a non-Liberal candidate.

There is academic research suggesting other systems produce a better voter turnout. Proportional representation and some other methods usually result in a higher number of women being elected.

In proportional representation electoral systems, which are used in most of Europe and many other countries, the popular vote is used as a basis for the makeup of parliament. If a party receive 36 per cent of the vote, it is given 36 per cent of the available seats.

Some people don't like the fact that this leaves them without "their own," local representatives, but there are many variations on this theme. New Zealand provides a good example for Canadians, since its previous system was similar to ours. Voters still choose their MP, but there are additional seats in parliament that are used to augment party numbers as necessary to reflect the popular vote.

Minority governments are more common, but the parties expect that and are forced to work together to produce results.

There are lots of ways we could change voting in Ontario to make the government better reflect our wishes. We eagerly await the panel's recommendations.

