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Assembly voting for voting's sake

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KAWARTHA LAKES – After a recent meeting in Peterborough, the Citizens' Assembly on Electoral Reform is one step closer to the first electoral system change in Ontario since 1792.

Come February, 2007, they'll be voting for voting's sake, and of course, that of democracy.

More than 50 people, young and old, turned out at Trent University last week to debate a number of different voting systems. Twelve residents from the riding of Haliburton-Victoria-Brock made formal presentations during the three-hour session.

If the assembly at the end of its deliberation period concludes Ontario needs a new system, a referendum would take place during the next provincial election in October, 2007. Any actual changes to

ballots or procedures would not take place until the following election.

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Put in place by the provincial government, the assembly is still in the consultation phase, accepting written comments from the public until Jan. 15, 2007, and participating in consultations in cities across Ontario until later in the same month.

"We're so used to voting without really looking at the system," said Marie McLaren, the assembly's representative for Haliburton-Victoria-Brock.

McLaren said she was very impressed with the calibre of last week's presentations and how well people spoke.

She is not able to make any predictions about what the assembly may decide in February, and can't really, as the decision will be a collaborative process with the other 103 riding representatives.

At Peterborough's meeting, however, McLaren noticed a definite trend towards the proportional representation group, which includes voting systems such as List PR and and Single Transferable Vote. Both systems often result in a

coalition government and single party majorities are rare.

Ontario's current system, commonly known as "first past the post," is part of the plurality voting system. The nickname is a reference to horse racing. It's most significant flaw is that it doesn't represent how the majority votes. Winners of the election may not accurately represent the distribution of the votes. In the 1926 federal election, 42.2 per cent of Manitoba residents voted for the Conservatives, but they didn't win a single seat. The Liberals received 19.5 per cent of the votes and seven seats.

McLaren's worried that people won't know the assembly's evaluation process is taking place. Even if it makes it to the referendum stage, she hopes people will take the time to learn about some of the different systems.

"If they don't know what's going on, they're just going to vote for the status quo," McLaren said.

In the new year, the assembly will hear from a group of students from across Ontario about their ideas for electoral reform.

The assembly's riding representatives were essentially selected at random, with attention given to a creating a balance of men and women.

To find information about how to contribute to the evaluation of Ontario's electoral system, visit www.citizensassembly.gov.on.ca.

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Voting elsewhere

As Ontario studies possible electoral reform, here are some of the voting systems used in some countries around the world:

Alternative Vote: Australia, Fiji, New Guinea,

Two-round System: Egypt, France, Vietnam

Single Transferable Vote: Australia, Malta,

Parallel Systems: Japan, Pakistan, Russia

List PR: Greece, Spain Sweden, Switzerland

