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| | | 122359 |
| Date 18.01.2007 | Circ. 17000 Page A3 | 1 / 1 |

Electoral reform representative seeks input

'No system without disadvantages,' Gibeau has found

BY **KEN SITTER**
The Nugget

Roland Gibeau knows he is searching for perfection in an imperfect world.

So Nipissing's representative on Ontario's Citizen's Assembly on Electoral Reform is looking for help to find the next best solution to an electoral system that leaves many voters angry.

"People make it loud and clear they don't like what they've got," said Gibeau, whose own dissatisfaction with Ontario's "first-past-the-post" system got him involved with the assembly.

"I was like everybody else," said the retired real estate appraiser. "I didn't know anything about electoral reform but that the system we have now, winner take all, is one of the problems."

It bothers an otherwise apolitical Gibeau that members of provincial parliament can be elected with the support of only 35 per cent of voters, and majority governments with less than 50 per cent of the vote.

When the Ontario government came knocking last spring with an invitation to the assembly — 120,000 letters were sent to randomly selected voters — the North Bay man was one of 22,000 who responded.

Invited to a selection meeting, Gibeau found himself in a room with like-minded reformers, many from Nipissing. His name was drawn "from a hat" to represent the riding as one of 103 members of the assembly.

Though they're only required to meet as a group two weekends a month, assembly members have been kept busy learning about electoral systems and attending public consultations to get grassroots input, he said.

A meeting Tuesday evening in Ottawa drew more than 200 people,

though a session in North Bay in November drew only 17 people.

"It's been like a political science course," Gibeau said, adding guest speakers from Australia, New Zealand, Ireland and elsewhere explained their electoral systems.

"I found out that nobody's an expert on it (electoral reform)," said Gibeau, "... and that there is no system without disadvantages."

For example, the assembly hears a lot about proportional representation, he said, which sounds good but in practice would require additional MPPs for each constituency.

"To make it work properly, you pretty much have to increase the number of representatives per riding.

"If you go to a system that requires three representatives per riding, all of a sudden you have 309 representatives ... I don't think anybody wants to go there."

The issue is compounded by a loss of accountability, he said. To which of the three MPPs does a voter take a problem or hold accountable for something done or left undone?

In addition to hearing how the system can be improved, Gibeau is interested in how Northern Ontario, and particularly women and aboriginals, can be adequately represented.

"If there is a way that these people can be better represented, I would like to hear about it," he said.

After the Jan. 31 deadline for public submissions, members will review the comments and continue to meet every second weekend to try to reach a consensus on how Ontario's electoral system should work.

Any proposal — the assembly can recommend the status quo — must be

submitted to the province by May 15, and voters will get an opportunity to pass judgment on the assembly's work in a referendum during the October provincial election.

But first, there will be a public education campaign to help people understand how the proposed changes will work, he said.

To be implemented, the changes will need to be approved by 60 per cent of votes cast provincewide plus a simple majority in at least 60 per cent of Ontario's ridings, a standard that many assembly members dislike.

A similar attempt to reform British Columbia's electoral system failed in 2005 when the proposed changes received only 57.5 per cent of the popular vote, though approved by a simple majority in almost 80 per cent of the ridings.

MPPs and the provincial government are routinely elected with less than 50 per cent of the vote, said Gibeau, repeating one of his peeves with the current system.

Voters with an opinion on what can be done to improve the electoral system can do so online at www.citizen-sassembly.gov.on.ca, or mail or fax a submission to the assembly by Jan. 31.

People can also review the more than 300 submissions already made online and summaries of more than a dozen public sessions.

