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| <b>The Sun Times (Owen Sound, ON)</b> |                                   | Order/Commande |
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# We're not alone in grappling with electoral reform

Public meeting  
planned for  
Owen Sound Dec. 4

Since I wrote my last column I have been at two more learning sessions.

There is so much to learn about the various systems and whether the systems are pertinent to our province, such as whether the changes translate easily, whether there is a major learning curve for the electorate, whether the system is too complex, whether the system gives or takes power away from political parties.

Over Remembrance Day weekend the Citizens' Assembly on Electoral Reform heard from seven guest speakers from around the world. They helped us gain more insight into our task.

Prof. André Blais from the Université de Montréal and Louis Massicotte, on leave from the same university and also a visiting professor at American University, Washington, D.C., told us about the particulars of the various electoral systems. They said to keep in mind the kind of government that we would like (majority, minority, or coalition) when forming our recommendation. We need to think about whether the system would be acceptable to the constituents, whether there is enough voter choice, and whether it has created competition within parties.

Bill Cross, associate professor at Carleton University, spoke about the changes that New Brunswick is going through. Through their process, they had to decide on what principles were important to them. They began with seven principles, similar to ours and finally narrowed it down to four:

- Local representation.
- Fair representation.
- Equality of the vote.
- Effective government

In the end they've chosen to go with a system they call N.B. MMP, short for

New Brunswick Mixed Member Proportional. They believe that this system, which gives the voter two votes, fulfills all the criteria of their principles

Prof. Ken Carty served as the director of research for the Citizens' Assembly on Electoral Reform in British Columbia. There the assembly decided to go with a new electoral system called B.C. STV (B.C. Single Transferable Vote). This system allows the voters to rank the candidates in order of preference. Quite possibly there could be more than one candidate from the same party on the ballot. The B.C. government required that the proposal be put to a referendum that required 60 per cent of the vote to pass. It was however endorsed by 57.4 per cent of the electorate, and thus was turned

down. The people of British Columbia will have another chance to vote on this issue in 2009.

Prof. Elizabeth McLeay gave us details about electoral reform in New Zealand. There they started the process in 1986 and finally implemented their current system in 1996. They, like New Brunswick, chose an MMP system (Mixed Member Proportional). Professor McLeay enlightened us with the reasoning behind the choice and gave us insights into its workings. She told us not everyone was happy with the system, but now that all the growing pains are gone it is working very well.

Prof. David Farrell spoke about electoral reform itself. He gave us information concerning the practicalities of an election, who gets elected, who runs the government and how policies are set. He also went over the fundamentals: Is it a stable government? An accountable government? A representa-



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tive democracy? Is the member of parliament linked to the voters? — all things we need to think about.

Prof. Sarah Birch from the University of Essex, who is knowledgeable in the electoral systems of new democracies, also spoke to the assembly. She expanded on voter choice, competition and accountability in regard to the roles of individual politicians versus parties.

I remember saying in one of my articles that we had heard from some big guns in political science. Well, I think we heard from some really big guns on this day. We had the pleasure of having a dinner meeting/question and an-

swer session with this group of scholars that evening. I had the pleasure of sitting beside Prof. Birch during the meal — I think she was as much interested in us as a citizens group as we were in them.

All in all, it was a very interesting and informative day.

The assembly is very interested in public input. There is opportunity for comments and suggestions on our website, or you can come to the public meeting at 7 p.m. on Dec. 4 at the Owen Sound and North Grey Union Public Library. Even if you don't have anything to say on the subject come out and listen to what others have to

say. Hear and be heard! See you there!



**ARITA DROOG**