

# Prepare for dramatic change to our provincial democracy

**J**ust two months from now, a group of 103 Ontario voters will recommend dramatic, wholesale change to this province's electoral system.

They will propose the province scrap the process used for 215 years to elect MPPs and represent ridings at Queen's Park.

In its place, they will recommend a system that will fundamentally change the face of politics in Ontario, the way we vote, who represents us in government and how even we form governments.

At least this is the scenario unfolding as members of the Ontario Citizens' Assembly begin their final deliberations.

For the past six months, assembly members have immersed themselves in meetings, expert briefings on electoral systems and public forums to help them understand our current system, alternatives and gauge public appetite for change.

Premier Dalton McGuinty, in the last provincial election campaign, promised a review of Ontario's electoral system and delivered by creating the assembly, composed of voters independently selected from each of



**James Wallace**

## QUEEN'S PARK

the province's 103 ridings.

Assembly members will now spend six weekends over the next two months deciding whether to keep the status quo or recommend change. All signs point to a recommendation for change.

In 41 public meetings across the province, from Kenora to Cornwall to Windsor and all points in between, a significant if not a majority of speakers have urged assembly members to embrace change.

Privately, those who have been observing the process are also betting the 103 assembly members settle on an alternative to our current system.

That's hardly a sure bet. The assembly hasn't yet decided and members have made a point

throughout this exercise of stressing the need to keep an open mind during deliberations.

However, the informed opinions of those close to the assembly and its workings are probably close to the mark.

Change was the verdict reached by a shadow assembly composed of 103 Ontario students. The kids are presenting their findings this weekend after spending the past several weeks studying and discussing electoral reform.

Specifically, they recommended moving to a mixed member proportional system used in countries such as Germany, New Zealand and Mexico where voters cast a ballot both for local candidates and the party of their choice.

Seats are divvied up according to the percentage of votes won by each party but members are selected from lists of local and party candidates.

The adult assembly is looking at the same options the kids studied.

And although they could stick with the status quo, the impetus for change in a process designed to study change may prove irresistible.

George Thomson, a lawyer and former deputy minister and family court judge in Kingston, heads the



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**Citizens' Assembly Secretariat.**

Thomson has just presented assembly members with a plan to help them deliberate and reach a final recommendation.

Having been on trial these past six months, Ontario's brand of democracy is now being judged.

Thomson's plan would see the assembly make recommendations as early as mid-March, a full month before his secretariat is due to make its final report to the province.

He has also recommended assembly members narrow their choices to two alternatives and fully flesh out those alternatives before choosing one. "If the assembly recommends a new system they have to recommend it in detail," Thomson said. "They can't just say we want to move to system A or system B," he said.

"What's being suggested is they design a couple of alternatives in detail so that they can see what it is they're comparing to the present system."

If the assembly follows the recommendations and reaches a verdict in mid-April, a final, official report and recommendation will follow a month later.

At that point, there is supposed to

be a massive public education program followed by a referendum to give every Ontarian a chance to vote on the recommendation in the October provincial election.

That raises a couple of concerns.

Exactly how the province intends to engage 12.5 million Ontarians to debate electoral change remains a mystery. "The government hasn't quite yet told us how they plan to manage the public education campaign," Thomson said.

Given the importance of the potential change, that's troubling.

Finally, the assembly's recommendation will come just six months before the October election campaign. The implications and consequences of such fundamental democratic reform will be tackled during the compressed and superheated atmosphere of an election.

As worthwhile as the assembly process has been thus far, that could prove an ambitious, if not risky undertaking.

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