Prepare for dramatic change to our provincial democracy

Just 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 Citizen’s 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 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 divided 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
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 democ-

racy 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 assem-
by 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 recom-

mend 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 recom-

mandations 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 pro-

gram followed by a referendum to
give every Ontarian a chance to vote
on the recommendation in the Octo-
ber 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
told us how they plan to manage the
government’s public education cam-
paign,” Thomson said.

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

Finally, the assembly’s recom-

mendation will come just six months
before the October election cam-
paign. The implications and conse-
quen

ce of such fundamental democ-

cratic reform will be tackled during
the compressed and superheated
atmosphere of an election.

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

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