

Rebuilding the democratic process

Panel of Ontarians is reviewing the province's electoral system

FRAN BYERS IS A SOCIAL WORKER who has lived most of her life in the Gananoque area. She has worked with children and families at risk and is now involved in supporting persons with mental illness living independently in the community.

Buddhadeb Chakrabarty arrived as a refugee from Bangladesh and is now part owner of a Kingston restaurant.

Dianne Carey is a longtime Kingston resident who has worked with the federal government for 34 years.



GEORGE THOMSON

Cornelio Reyes Jr. came to Canada from the Philippines in 1976 and is a technology co-ordinator with a large retail firm. He lives in Belleville.

These four individuals have very different backgrounds and life experiences, and they represent the diversity that is Ontario now. However, they have at least two things in common. One is that they are Ontario voters, and the other is that they were randomly selected and have eagerly agreed to be members of Ontario's first Citizens' Assembly.

The full assembly is an equally diverse group of 104 Ontarians and I am its chair. Over the next eight months,

we will assess Ontario's electoral system – the way our votes are turned into elected representatives in the legislature – and compare it with those that exist in other democracies.

This is a task usually assigned to expert panels, legislative committees or Royal Commissions that consult with the public, modestly or more extensively, in the course of doing their work. However, the Citizens' Assembly is a fundamentally different approach that reflects a basic trust in the capabilities of ordinary citizens. Real time is being devoted to enabling Assembly members to learn, to consult broadly with the public, and then to deliberate and decide together. If they should recommend a different electoral system, rather than affirming the one we now have, then they are guaranteed direct access to their fellow citizens in the form of a referendum that will ask voters to decide whether they accept that recommendation.

These characteristics make this a remarkable experiment in citizen engagement and were, in large measure, what made these randomly selected individuals willing and eager to take on a responsibility that will consume up to 30 or 40 hours a month of their time. If successful, the assembly could serve as a model for discussion of other major public policy issues. It could be one means of rebuilding public interest in the democratic process and the basic institutions of government. For this reason alone, the work of this assem-



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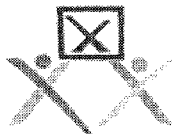
bly is extremely important, regardless of the result.

But why re-examine our electoral system? Hasn't our so-called "first-past-the-post" system stood the test of time since it was first introduced in 1841? What has moved this issue to a high level on the public policy agenda?

One answer is to note that Ontario is joining many long-established democracies, including Britain, Australia, and New Zealand, that have re-examined their electoral systems. Four provinces – New Brunswick, Quebec, British Columbia, and Prince Edward Island – have been discussing the issue and have considered, or are now considering, specific proposals for reform. The desire to assess long-standing electoral systems extends well beyond Ontario's boundaries.

A more substantive reason is that electoral systems have a significant effect on the choices we have when we vote and on who is elected to represent us. Proponents of various systems

(and there are four basic families of electoral systems, with many variations in use in democracies around the world) make strong arguments about how their preferred systems enhance the important principles or values that underlie electoral systems, such as fairness of



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representation, voter choice, proportionality, effective parties, and stable and effective government. The simple fact is that we have never in this province publicly considered and evaluated our present system and alternative systems that might replace it, against these principles or values. The benefits of doing so seem obvious, whether or not it leads to a recommendation for change.

Perhaps the most important reason is that the Ontario of 2006 is, in many respects, very different from the one that existed in 1841. A good illustration of this is the assembly itself. At least 27 members were born outside Canada, a statistic that should not be surprising. More than 20 countries of ori-

gin are reflected in our membership. We are men and women in equal numbers, at least one member is an aboriginal person, and all ages are well represented. A similar assembly in 1841 would have looked very different. Members' different backgrounds also suggest that their starting positions in looking at this issue are probably equally varied. It is timely, early in this new century, to ask a representative group of citizens to make a values-based recommendation on whether to retain the present system or to move to another one.

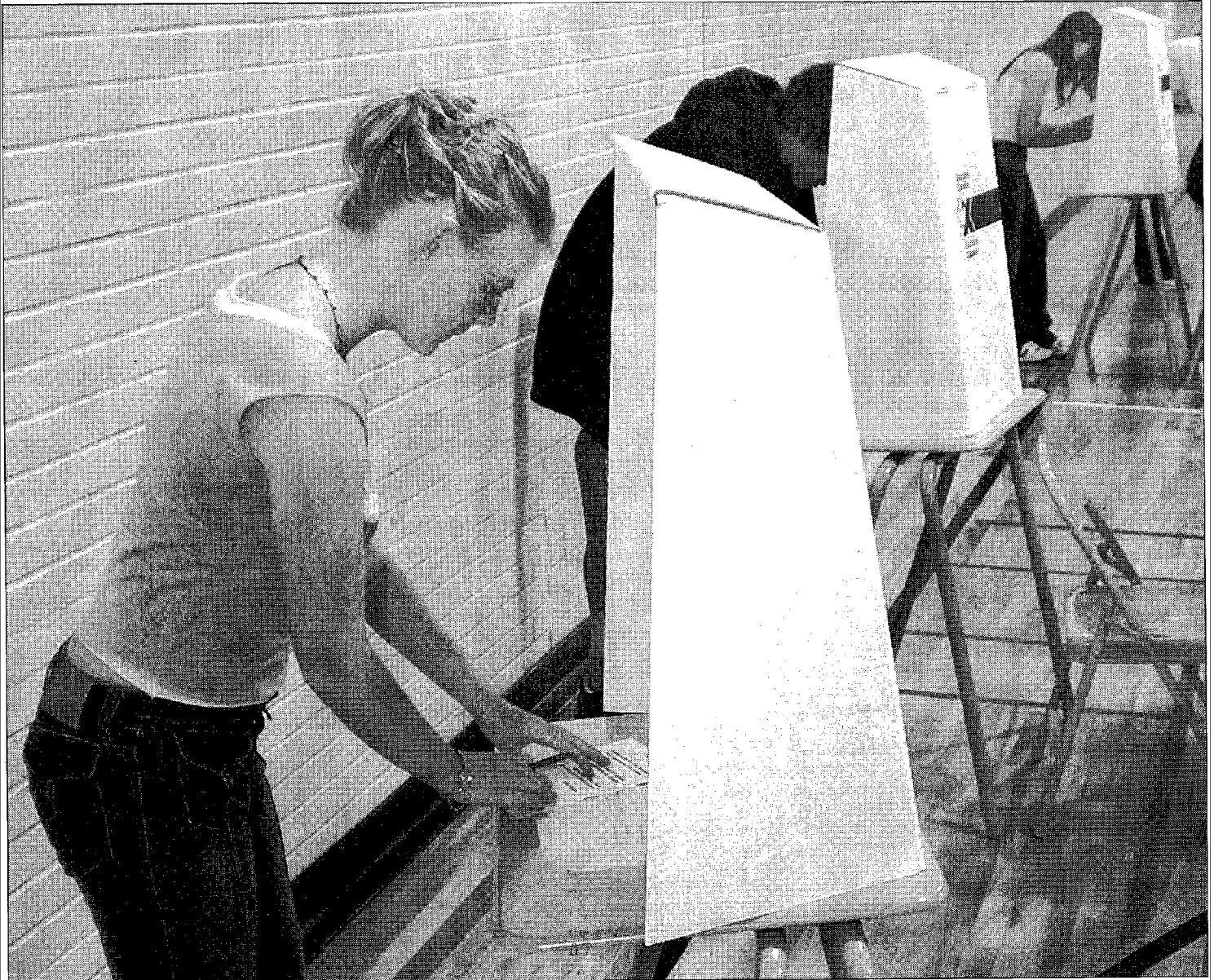
The assembly will learn about electoral systems and about the principles they reflect during a six-weekend learning phase, led by Professor Jonathan Rose of Queen's University. Then, interested persons will be able to participate in public meetings with Assembly members or make written submissions. Meetings are planned for Kingston and Belleville in mid-January. In February, the assembly will begin deliberations and its final report will be submitted in May 2007.

Assembly members know that the process will only be truly successful if

their fellow citizens are learning with them and if the assembly learns from them. It isn't enough to wait for the assembly's report before focusing on an issue that takes some time to learn and understand. Visit the assembly website, www.citizensassembly.gov.on.ca, where you can find all the learning materials and register to receive the electronic newsletter. Register in mid-October to make a presentation at one of our public meetings. Let the assembly members know which principles are, for you, the most important when designing an electoral system and whether these lead you to want to keep the present system or change to a different one.

I know your citizen representatives will carry out their role with great skill and total commitment to the task. Help them by adding your voice to this extraordinary process.

George Thomson is the chair of the Citizens' Assembly on Electoral Reform. He is a former family court judge in Kingston who lives on Howe Island. For information, see www.citizensassembly.gov.on.ca.



Michael Lea/Whig-Standard file photo

Students at Frontenac Secondary School line up to cast their vote in a mock federal election in June 2004. Ontario's electoral system may be in for dramatic change once the Ontario Citizens' Assembly on Electoral Reform finishes assessing how our votes transform into elected representatives in Queen's Park.