

Citizens' assembly refreshing politics

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Ontario is about to embark on an innovative experiment in democracy and all Ontario citizens are invited to get involved. Beginning Saturday, the Ontario Citizens' Assembly on Electoral Reform will convene in Toronto to begin an assessment of Ontario's electoral system.

The members of the assembly will hold weekend meetings twice a month as they work toward submitting a report to the government by May 15, 2007. The citizens' assembly is innovative in several respects. First, its 103 members were chosen randomly from Ontario's Permanent Register of Electors. Several thousand individuals were invited to serve in the assembly and those who expressed an interest attended a meeting where they placed their name in a ballot box.

The name of one member (and two alternates) from each of Ontario's 103 constituencies was drawn from the box. No campaigning, no speeches - literally the luck of the draw. The assembly is also innovative in the sense that a task of considerable political importance is being assigned to amateurs. No elected officials were eligible to serve in the assembly and no previous knowledge or experience about electoral systems was required in order to participate.

The idea that "ordinary citizens" should be given a formal mandate to evaluate a key component of our political system and to recommend corrective action is unprecedented in Ontario. As well, the government has ceded to the assembly its responsibility to control electoral reform. If the assembly recommends making a change to Ontario's current electoral system, the government is required to put the question to voters in a provincewide referendum, probably at the time of the next provincial election in October 2007.

Many Ontarians will probably ask: "Why is this happening?" The short answer to the question is Dalton McGuinty promised that, if elected in 2003, he would initiate a process of democratic renewal in Ontario. Despite the government's claim it has initiated "the most ambitious democratic renewal process in Ontario's history," the steps so far have been modest - and arguably marginal . . . to most people. The commencement of the assembly experiment may change that verdict.

A more complex response would be the need to consider the relevance and suitability of our electoral system is long overdue. After all - despite the creation of a non-partisan administrative structure - Ontario's electoral system has not changed in its essence since the introduction of the secret ballot. More critical, perhaps, is another question: "Why is this happening now?"

Again there is a short answer - four other provinces have already initiated an examination of electoral reform and there is a growing sense in many parts of Canada the existing electoral system is one of the contributing factors to a "democratic malaise."

Ontario, from this perspective, is jumping on a bandwagon that already has some momentum. It is less easy to answer the "why now?" question on a more philosophical level because, in contrast to the other Canadian provinces where reform is being pursued, the Ontario initiative has not been prompted by less-than-satisfactory experiences with the traditional single-member plurality electoral system.

In Prince Edward Island and British Columbia, there have been elections within the last 20 years that produced a solid majority government facing a minuscule opposition (of one or two seats) or none at all, as happened in New Brunswick in 1987. In other cases, such as Quebec and British Columbia, the electoral system allowed a political party to win more seats than its main opponent, even though the "losing" party accumulated more votes across the province.

Arguably, Ontario elections have not produced lop-sided results since the '50s and only once in the last 60 years has there been a case of the party with the most votes across the province failing to win the most seats (in 1985 when David Peterson's Liberals captured 48 seats with 38 per cent of the popular vote while the PCs under Frank Miller won 52 seats on 37 per cent of the vote).

In other words, Ontario's invitation to consider thinking about electoral reform through the assembly is not being driven by a crisis or by an obvious failure of our electoral system. Of course there are flaws, but are they compelling enough to develop a whole new system?

Cynical observers might suggest this whole exercise is doomed to failure and frustration since it is unlikely a grassroots assembly can become knowledgeable enough in the time available to make insightful evaluations of a complex process – let alone to propose acceptable solutions to its presumed shortcomings.

The more positive observer would say taking the task of evaluating the electoral system out of the hands of those with the most at stake in it (that is, elected representatives and party officials) may bring a refreshing antidote to the disrespect normally associated with politics.

The most optimistic observer would say that Ontario has been offered a democratic luxury – the opportunity to evaluate in a calm and dispassionate atmosphere - without the urgency generated by a malfunctioning electoral system - the values and purposes we want our electoral system to serve.

The expectations and qualities we might seek in our electoral system are not "given." Ontario's citizens should take the opportunity created by this innovative experiment in democracy to offer their own perspectives on how elections should function in Ontario.

The assembly is ready to listen. It is time for the rest of us to speak up.

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