

Panel asks public's help in election review

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An independent Ontario body has begun a historic review of the electoral system used in this province to elect MPPs.

The Citizens Assembly on Electoral Reform began meetings in Toronto today to begin the selection process for the 52 women and 51 men who will be asked to consider fundamental changes to the way we vote.

The Cornwall meeting will be Thursday, June 15 at the Ramada Inn between 7 to 8:30 p.m.

"I think it is the beginning of an historic process, both the first time we've had a citizens assembly and the first time we've had a look at the way people are elected, George Thomson," chairman of the assembly told Osprey News.

Provincial election races in Ontario are currently decided in roughly the same way as horse races the first past the post wins.

Several candidates run in each of the provinces 103 ridings and the one who gets the most votes represents that riding in Provincial Parliament.

Premier Dalton McGuinty promised in the last election to review electoral reform within his first mandate.

In March, his minister for democratic renewal, Marie Bountrogianni, unveiled plans for a 103-member panel chosen randomly from ordinary citizens in each provincial riding and expectations for a report recommending either change or the status quo by May 2007.

"It is important that Ontarians have the opportunity to reexamine the electoral system we have inherited and determine whether they wish to retain it or exchange it for another," Bountrogianni said yesterday afternoon in a statement.

"Whether the ultimate result is a new system or not, the very exercise of examining our election system will reinvigorate and tighten our understanding of our democratic system," she said.

Elections Ontario has mailed out invitations to participate some 124,000 invitations to voters randomly selected from riding voter lists and plans to hold 30 meetings in 18 cities over the next five weeks

to pare down a short-list of 11-13 voters per riding to one.

After explaining more fully the expectations of assembly members, the name of each short-listed candidate will go into a box and one name will be drawn.

Elections Ontario has already pre-determined which ridings will be represented by women and men.

By mid-July, all 103 assembly members and two alternates will have been chosen and the group will spend the next several months hearing from academics and experts on democratic reform. At least one must be a self-identified Aboriginal member.

NEXT PHASE

The next phase will see assembly members hold meetings in their own ridings to hold meetings with local stakeholders and meet collectively to hear broader-scale presentations.

Local citizens and community groups will be invited to attend and speak at these riding meetings or to make written submissions.

Finally, the group will deliberate under the chairmanship of former provincial court judge and deputy minister George Thomson and wrestle with the critical question before the assembly should Ontario keep its current electoral system or consider change?

If a majority of the members decide change should be considered, a binding referendum will likely be held during the fall 2007 provincial election campaign, meaning voters will ultimately decide whether or not to embrace change.

Ontario is not the first province to contemplate electoral reform.

Prince Edward Island is struggling with electoral issues and British Columbia has already struck a citizens assembly (which Ontarios model is partly based upon) and is heading toward a second referendum on change.

The proposed B.C. model is somewhat complicated but would move the province more toward a system of proportional representation, where a partys share

of seats in the Legislature would be more closely aligned with its overall share of votes. Independents and candidates from smaller parties (such as the Green Party) would have a better chance of getting elected.

Electoral boundaries would be enlarged and several MPPs could be elected in each riding.

At the ballot box, voters would rank as many as six candidates from their top choice to their last choice and MPPs would be selected according to their overall voter support.

Ontario's citizens assembly is not likely to adopt B.C.'s model but is likely to consider some form of proportional representation among the options it studies.

Thomson, who was appointed by Lieut. Gov. James K. Bartleman, said he expects the assembly will generate a lot of interest across the province, particularly once meetings start happening in regional communities and people begin to appreciate the change that's being contemplated.

"Electoral systems are enormously important but it's something people need a lot of time to learn about," Thomson said.

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