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## Possible electoral overhaul starts at local level

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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.

"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 province's 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, with expectations for a report recommending either change or the status quo by May 2007.

"It is important that Ontarians have the opportunity to re-examine 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."

Elections Ontario has mailed out 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 to 13 voters per riding to one. After explaining more fully the expectations of assembly members, the names of the short-listed candidates 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. The next phase will see assembly members hold meetings in their own ridings 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 (upon which Ontario's model is partly based) 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, in which a party's 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 Lt.-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.

#### CITIZENS' ASSEMBLY

**What:** Elections Ontario is holding a series of meetings to select a representative from each electoral riding in Ontario to sit on the Citizens' Assembly on Electoral Reform.

**When:** A meeting of invitees randomly selected from riding voters' lists from three Kingston-area ridings (Kingston and the Islands, Hastings-Frontenac-Lennox and Addington, and Prince Edward Hastings) will be held on Sunday, June 11, from 1 to 2:30 p.m.

**Where:** Holiday Inn Kingston Waterfront Hotel, 2 Princess St. (549-8400).

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