

# From refuge to reform

## Kingstonian chosen for electoral group

By Brock Harrison  
Whig-Standard Staff Writer

**K**INGSTON'S BUDDHADEB CHAKRABARTY came to the city just under a decade ago as a refugee from Bangladesh.

Now, he'll represent you in a provincewide assembly that will decide how you will vote in the future.

The 34-year-old Chakrabarty, part owner of the Indian Cafe restaurant on Princess Street, was selected yesterday to be the Kingston and The Islands representative on a citizens' assembly that will spend the next year looking at electoral reform in Ontario.

His name was called in a meeting of about 40 representatives from four local provincial ridings. It was held to inform them about the assembly's work and to choose the representative from each riding through a random draw.

"I was very excited when they called my name. I was not expecting it," said Chakrabarty, who bounded out of his chair wearing a bright smile.

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In April, Elections Ontario sent letters to 124,000 voters at random asking them if they were interested in being on the Citizens' Assembly on Electoral Reform, which would be made up of one representative from each of the 103 electoral districts in the province. The assembly is part of the Liberal government's democratic renewal agenda.

Only 9,000 said yes to the request and from there, 15 from each riding were randomly chosen and invited to selection meetings in which the assembly members were to be chosen.

Before Chakrabarty's selection yesterday, 46 members had already been selected at meetings last weekend, mostly from the Toronto area.

By the end of the month, the assembly will be fully formed,

with 52 women and 51 men, including one aboriginal. They will then set to work, starting in September, evaluating Ontario's voting system and either give it a passing grade or fail it and suggest another system.

They will table a report to Democratic Renewal Minister Marie Bountrogianni in May. The assembly's recommendation will be put to a provincewide referendum before or in conjunction with the next provincial election on Oct. 4, 2007.

"I was a social science student in Bangladesh and I've always been interested in politics," said Chakrabarty, who hails from a small city called Moulvibazar. "I was thinking after I came to Canada it might be interesting for me to get involved with something like this."

Chakrabarty spent two years in Montreal working two

jobs in bagel and clothing factories before moving to Kingston to open his cafe. He now lives with his mother and sister. He left two brothers behind in Bangladesh.

"I'm a very proud Kingstonian," he said. "People are friendlier in Kingston than anywhere else."

When asked what ideas he might contribute to the assembly, Chakrabarty said he didn't know enough about electoral systems to say quite yet.

That suits the assembly just fine. George Thomson, the Howe Island resident and ex-Kingston judge chosen by the government

to chair the assembly, stressed at yesterday's meeting that having knowledge about electoral systems is not a prerequisite to being part of the assembly.

In fact, the 103 members will spend six weekends from September to November in Toronto at Osgoode Hall just learning about the different ways countries and provinces hold their democratic elections.

"We are following your lead on this project," Queen's University politics professor Jonathan Rose told the meeting. Rose will lead most of the classroom-like sessions at Osgoode Hall.

During the next phase of the assembly's mandate, individual members will consult with voters in their own riding and will travel to meet voters in other ridings to hear their ideas.

The third and final phase, the deliberation phase, will be spent debating what to recommend to the government. The group will make its decision with a simple majority vote.

Rose said the government will not in any way interfere in the assembly's work.

"Never before has this province asked its citizens to have this direct of a voice in an issue as important as this," Thomson said.

Chakrabarty says he'll be spending a lot of time on the Internet before September reading up on electoral systems and trying to come up with good ideas of his own.

"This is something completely new to me," he said.

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**CHAKRABARTY**

