

<b>Review (Niagara Falls, ON)</b>		Order/Commande
		<b>122359</b>
Date <b>08.07.2006</b>	Circ. <b>17500</b> Page <b>A1</b>	<b>1 / 4</b>

# Power to the people

## Ordinary residents start process of Citizens' Assembly of Electoral Reform

BY MATTHEW VAN DONGEN  
Osprey News Network

ST. CATHARINES – Very soon, a powerful person could end strategic voting in provincial elections forever.

Is it a crusading premier, or an outspoken judge? No. He is a recently retired building inspector from St. Catharines. His name is Ron Green.

Very soon, someone influential could set the stage for the first Green Party MPP to be elected to provincial parliament.

Is it a dynamic new political leader, or a climate scientist? No. She is a retired Grimsby information technology manager named Sue Tiley.

Green and Tiley aren't politicians, or experts, or party advocates. They're regular folk, people you may have met on the street.

Extremely powerful people.

Green and Tiley have joined 101 citizens from across the province in an experiment that could, on their say-so, explode Ontario's political

landscape.

Starting in September, the Citizens' Assembly on Electoral Reform will study whether Ontario should change the way voters elect their MPPs.

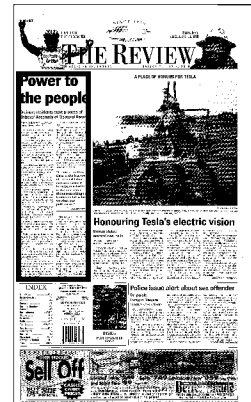
If they recommend change, the province has pledged to let Ontarians vote on the recommendation in a referendum.

"This has never been done before in the history of Ontario," said Jonathan Rose, a political science professor at Queen's University in Kingston.

In fact, Rose said, only British Columbia and the Netherlands have ever put this much power in the hands of regular citizens.

"It's only the third time in the history of the world that ordinary citizens have been asked to make a decision about something as fundamental as how we elect our politicians," he said.

"It's exciting. It's historic."



<b>Review (Niagara Falls, ON)</b>			Order/Commande <b>122359</b>
Date <b>08.07.2006</b>	Circ. <b>17500</b>	Page <b>A1</b>	<b>2 / 4</b>

It's also potentially confusing.

Some might ask why the province is paying 103 randomly chosen citizens to kick the tires of an electoral system that's survived since 1867.

Advocates for change point to several reasons:

- low voter turnout.
- strategic voting – the practice of voting to thwart the party you hate instead of for the party you like.
- wasted votes – under the current winner-take-all system, one party can gain a majority of seats without a majority of votes.

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*Prof. Jonathan Ros*

The scope of the project is also bewildering.

The assembly, under Rose's tutelage, will get a crash course in electoral systems from around the world.

Plurality majority systems. Proportional representation systems. Mixed member proportional representation systems.

Complicated names for complicated topics.

The eye-glazing details will have to be absorbed over eight months, two weekends per month, starting in September.

The members are students. Scientists. Teachers. Tradespeople. Some work at universities. Others did their life learning on the job.

The diverse group will study, consult with the public and report.

**See REFORM on Page A3**

In the end, they may decide to change the way we vote. Or they may

decide to do nothing at all.

Green, a longtime community volunteer, doesn't know which result is more likely, but he's keen to get started.

“It's history-making,” said the 56 year old. “We all get a say in the final result.”

Tiley, a 57-year-old grandmother, believes most people will cheer on the assembly, once they understand its purpose.

“I think lots of people have moments where they wonder if things (like elections) could be done differently, or better,” she said.

The members obviously care. Will anyone else?

Yes, if British Columbia's experience is any guide.

B.C.'s citizens' assembly spent a year in 2004 examining new ways to vote for their politicians.

They recommended drastic change, a form of proportional representation.

The option was narrowly voted down in 2005, so narrowly citizens will vote again on the same recom-

mendation in a 2009 referendum.

During the process, assembly members became minor celebrities, said B.C. assembly member Shoni Field.

“In some communities, members were stopped while walking down the street by people who recognized them,” Field said.

“They would ask about the process or talk about what ideas they agreed or disagreed with. It was more recognition than I expected.”

When it came time to explain their recommendations, members took their message on the road.

“Some ended up doing 50 or 60 speaking engagements,” Field said.

They're still passionate about the job.

After the assembly disbanded, the majority of members formed an alumni organization dedicated to informing B.C. residents about their work.

“After devoting a year of your life to it, we felt like we had the responsibility to see it through,” Field said.

Explaining the technicalities of electoral reform is challenging, she

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		<b>122359</b>
Date <b>08.07.2006</b>	Circ. <b>17500</b> Page <b>A1</b>	<b>3 / 4</b>

acknowledged.

But most people can relate to the potential consequences.

Under the B.C. assembly's recommended system, ridings would be larger and each would have multiple representatives.

Voters would rank candidates on the ballot, rather than choose a single name.

That means fewer votes are wasted, argue supporters, because a second, third or even fourth choice can still sway the results.

Theoretically, the system should give better representation to minority parties – perhaps giving the Green party, for example, its first elected representatives.

And when every vote counts, strategic voting should be eliminated, say fans of the system.

In Ontario, a switch to proportional representation would put smiles on the faces of local NDP and Green party members.

They're not so keen on the assembly, however.

"The process is of some concern to me," said NDP Niagara Centre MPP Peter Kormos. "I have no doubt the assembly will work hard to come to a reasonable conclusion.

"But we elect our politicians to make these decisions. Why aren't the Liberals making them?"

Kormos said the NDP has long supported proportional representation as a more fair electoral system.

"The government doesn't need a citizens' assembly to tell them it's the right thing to do. The Liberals are using this assembly as a way of shirking their own responsibilities to deal with democratic reform."

Tom Ferguson, a longtime Green party candidate in Niagara and one of the founders of the Ontario party, said the assembly process could be confusing.

Ferguson said the recommendations coming out of the B.C. assembly "were needlessly cumbersome" and ultimately difficult for voters to understand.

"This is only my own opinion, but I would almost rather see a group of political scientists or other experts study it and come up with a recommendation," he said.

Ontario can improve on the mis-

takes of the first assembly, Field said.

There was virtually no money available to help explain the assembly's proposed electoral system to the public, she said.

She believes that lack of education was the reason the proposal was narrowly voted down in a 2005 referendum.

The B.C. government recognized that mistake, however, and is now paying for advocacy groups to publicize the assembly's proposal.

"Education is important; an entire province has to vote on this," she said.

Public consultation is also vital, said Niagara Falls Liberal MPP Kim Craitor.

Craitor said he personally believes Ontario's electoral system needs "revamping" – but he doesn't think the Liberal government should "go in and do it alone."

"If we did that, we'd hear, 'you didn't allow the public input,'" he said.

Keeping politicians out of the decision-making also adds legitimacy to the process, added George Thomson, the government-appointed chairman of the committee.

"If politicians are part of the process, I think you risk turning it into a politically-driven discussion," said the former judge.

Involving ordinary citizens may be Ontario's best hope to reawaken mass interest in the political process, said Thomson.

The exercise is aimed at attracting young people, new immigrants and other citizens "who aren't terribly involved" in the electoral process.

"This is a new model of citizen engagement and an important one," he said.

"We're talking about one of the most important rights you have, the right to vote."



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Date <b>08.07.2006</b>	Circ. <b>17500</b>	Page <b>A1</b>	<b>4 / 4</b>

**ONTARIO'S CITIZENS' ASSEMBLY:  
A TIMELINE**

- April 25: Elections Ontario mailed letters to 120,000 randomly-chosen citizens on the permanent voters list.
  - June 26: 103 citizens – 52 female, 51 male – have been chosen to join the assembly.
  - September: members will begin meeting twice a month, for eight months.
  - May 27: the first assembly member is chosen. Citizens who expressed interest in joining the assembly attended selection and orientation meetings throughout the province.
  - May 15: due date for the assembly's recommendation.
  - TBA: If the assembly recommends changing Ontario's electoral system, the government will put the question to voters in a referendum – perhaps as early as the next election.
- One member per riding and two alternates were chosen by lottery.
- For more information on on Ontario's Citizens' Assembly, visit [www.citizen-sassembly.gov.on.ca](http://www.citizen-sassembly.gov.on.ca).