

The Sudbury Star (Sudbury, ON)		Order/Commande
		122359
Date 27.06.2006	Circ. 20323	Page A\$ 1 / 2

Local pair picked for assembly

More than 100 Ontario residents will examine electoral system

BY LARA BRADLEY
The Sudbury Star

A former managing editor of The Sudbury Star and a woman who has devoted her life to caring for her brain-injured sister are the two newest members of Ontario's Citizens' Assembly on Electoral Reform.

Richard Bowdidge, 76, will represent the riding of Nickel Belt, while Christine Robert, 41, will represent the riding of Sudbury. Elections Ontario randomly drew their names out of a box containing the names of more than 20 random invitees who turned out on Saturday morning.

Now, they will be charged with the task of deciding whether to change Ontario's electoral system.

The citizen's assembly will look at how votes in a provincial election are translated into seats in the legislature, how citizens vote, the style of the ballot paper, how votes are

counted and the final determination of who is elected.

Born in England, Bowdidge immigrated to Canada in 1957 looking to carve a place for himself in the world.

He found it in Sudbury, where he started working first at CKSO and then The Sudbury Star. Bowdidge retired from The Star in 1990, after serving for 30 years in various capacities including news editor, city hall reporter and managing editor.

Over the years, he devoted himself to a committee that worked "getting the university going," particularly the founding of Huntington College.

"I was surprised," he said. "I was also hopeful. It's a subject that needs some examination."

Bowdidge said he has a lot to learn about the electoral process. He's not in favour of change for change's sake, only if the

system could be improved.

"I've never been chosen for anything," said Robert. "It's the perfect thing. I get to learn how the system works and to speak for people who can't speak for themselves or don't have a voice."

Robert, who is on Ontario Disability Pension, hopes she can address the needs of others on disability pensions.

A country music enthusiast and an animal lover, she lives with her sister, who suffered a brain injury as a child, as well as three cats and a dog.

"I take care of her, though she helps out when she can," she said.

Robert is looking forward to "making history" in Ontario.

George Thomson, the chair of the assembly, was at the Saturday morning meeting.

A former judge and deputy minister, he was



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		122359
Date 27.06.2006	Circ. 20323	Page A\$
		2 / 2

THE FACTS

Ontario's Citizen's Assembly on Electoral Reform:

- ▶ **will be** made up of 104 members – one from each riding, as well as a chair appointed by the government;
- ▶ **will dedicate** six weekends, from September to November, to the learning phase;
- ▶ **will go** into public consultation mode from November to February;
- ▶ **will deliberate** on its findings for six weekends from February to April;
- ▶ **will hand in** its final report by May 15, 2007;
- ▶ **alternates** for the Sudbury riding are Kimberly McHugh and Angele Constantin;
- ▶ **alternates** for Nickel Belt are Andrew Oman and Raymond Dupuis;
- ▶ **will pay** members a per diem of \$150 per meeting day and receive reimbursement for meals, travel, and accommodation.

chosen to facilitate the assembly's work, but will

not have a vote (other than to break a tie) with the assembly.

He is excited to be involved with the history-making model that places the decision making in the hands of the people.

"It's a really unique model," he said. "There's one in the Netherlands, but it has never been done before in Ontario."

There has only been one other citizen's assembly in Canada — in British Columbia.

"They found it a tremendous experience," Thomson said. "They enjoyed it so much that they have an alumni.

"It's such a useful and empowering situation."

Two years ago, the same process was used in British Columbia to examine its electoral system.

The Citizens Assembly recommended a change in the electoral process and the question went to a referendum.

The vote narrowly missed passing by less than two per cent.

Different election processes are used across the world, and many have different results.

For example, proportional representation can mean more voices being heard in the legislature.

So far, Thomson has found that nobody has dropped out, although there are two alternates for each member just in case. To date, 95 of the 103 Assembly members have been chosen.

If the group of 52 women and 51 men decides a change is in order, the question goes to Ontario's voting population in the form of a referendum at the next provincial election.

In the end, it's up to Ontarians to decide whether they want to change the electoral system. If they believe the current electoral system no longer represents their values, it could be the first time in 156 years the system changes.