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Your chance to alter democracy

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Aside from choosing a government every four years, it's rare that Ontarians get real say on how their political system works, but 103 people now being selected at random are preparing to change that.

The 51 men and 52 women now being chosen at random for a "citizen's assembly" set up by the Ontario Liberals will study the province's electoral system to find out what works and what can be improved. The 103 people represent each of the province's ridings.

It's a progressive move. Changing a system that typically benefits incumbent governments is not something that's usually entertained, especially by a majority government. Starting in September, the citizen's assembly will meet twice a month to study other systems, hold public meetings and debate ideas. The assembly will produce a report by May. Premier Dalton McGuinty has entertained the possibility that the recommendations could be enacted by the next election.

Depending on what the assembly recommends, there could be sweeping changes to how we elect our government. One of the key ideas the assembly will consider is a move towards proportional representation. Currently, Ontarians vote for their candidate in each riding, and the one with the most votes wins. That produces a legislature that's out of whack with actual voting patterns.

For example, in the 2003 election, the Liberals gained 46.6 per cent of the votes but won 70 per cent of the seats (72 of 103). The Conservatives won 34.6 per cent of the vote but got only 24 seats. The NDP garnered 14.7 per cent of the votes, but won only seven seats. Such a system often yields majority governments, but if the assembly recommends proportional representation, majorities will pretty much be a thing of the past. (The last premier to win more than 50 per cent of the vote in Ontario was Mitch Hepburn, a Liberal, in 1937.)

British Columbia went through much the same process before its last election. The assembly there recommend a form of proportional representation, but it was complicated, and voters narrowly rejected it.

Whatever the assembly recommends - assuming it recommends changes - will be put to a province-wide referendum.

The people selected to sit on the assembly are truly "grassroots" voters. A scan of the citizen's assembly website shows people being chosen are from all backgrounds. For example, they include a metallurgical engineer, a university student, a child-care worker who is also an immigrant and a retired natural resources worker.

Sudbury's two riding representatives were chosen on the weekend. Richard Bowdidge, 76, a former managing editor of The Sudbury Star, will represent Nickel Belt. Christine Robert, 41, a disability pensioner who looks after her sister who suffered a brain injury as a child, will represent Sudbury. The pair are good representatives for this region's diverse community.

Over the next few months, local voters will be offered an opportunity to have your say on how your government is selected. McGuinty has set up a process that has enough legitimacy that, with an election on the horizon, voters' input won't be easily ignored. If you're one of those who constantly grumble that the government doesn't represent you, or that your one vote doesn't matter, now is the time to address both of those issues by offering your input. If you don't take advantage of this process, you'll still get to grumble, but you won't get to make a difference. What do you think? Send us your opinion in a Letter to the Editor at 33 Mackenzie St., Sudbury, P3C, or fax it to 674-6834 or e-mail it to letters@thesudburystar.com