

Community Dispatch

An InfoFax of Community Development Halton

November 2006

Vol. 11, No. 3

THE CITIZENS' ASSEMBLY ON ELECTORAL REFORM

I thought it important to bring to your attention a unique experiment underway in our province. A Citizens' Assembly has been constituted to review Ontario's electoral system. The Citizens' Assembly will recommend whether Ontario keeps its current electoral system or whether it should be changed. If a change is recommended it will be put to a referendum by the next provincial election in October 2007. As residents of Halton, there are a number of opportunities to understand better the Citizens' Assembly, to explore other electoral systems and to voice your opinion, preferences and concerns about our electoral system and the values underlying it (see page 4). I have synthesized material found on the Citizens' Assembly website for your perusal. I hope that you will find time to participate in this exciting process of renewal.

*Joey Edwardh
Executive Director*

Should Ontario keep its current electoral system or change to a new one?

The Citizens' Assembly is a first for Ontario. It gives citizens a direct voice in determining the options we have when we vote and how our votes are translated into seats for Members of Provincial Parliament (MPPs).

Ontario has changed significantly since our first parliament was elected in 1792. Since that time the electoral system has never been publicly considered or evaluated. Some people think the current system has stood the test of time. Others think it's time for a change. The Citizens' Assembly process gives all Ontarians an opportunity to learn more about Ontario's current electoral system, as well as others, and to decide which one they think is best for this province.

The Citizens' Assembly is made up of 103 randomly selected citizens plus the Chair. The Assembly was established by a regulation under Ontario's *Election Act* and is independent of government. Its mandate is to assess Ontario's electoral system and other systems and to recommend whether the province should keep its current system or adopt a different one.

Electoral systems are based on principles or values, such as fair representation, voter choice and stable government. This is the first time Ontario citizens have had the opportunity to discuss what we value in an electoral system and what system we believe best reflects these values.

The Citizens' Assembly invites Ontarians to get involved and add their voice to this important process. The Assembly will identify what principles Ontarians value most in their electoral system. Based on what the Assembly hears and learns, it will recommend whether Ontario should keep its current electoral system or change to a new one.

This recommendation carries real weight. If the Assembly recommends a new electoral system, the Ontario government has promised to put it to a referendum by the next election in October 2007 so that all voters can have their say.

The Citizens' Assembly is asking the public four questions:

1. Which of the following principles [see below] described are most important to you? Why? Are there other principles you think are important? Why?
2. Does Ontario's current electoral system reflect the principles that are important to you? If yes, why? If no, why not?

3. Do you think Ontario should keep its current electoral system or change to a different one? If you think Ontario should change to a different system, which one do you prefer? Why? How does the system you prefer reflect the principles that are important to you?
4. Do you have any other comments or recommendations related to the Assembly's mandate?

Principles and Characteristics of Electoral Systems

The regulation that created the Citizens' Assembly directs the Assembly to consider eight principles and characteristics and any others it believes are important. These principles were recommended by the former Select Committee on Electoral Reform, established by the Ontario legislature in 2005 to study electoral systems. The committee was made up of MPPs from the Liberal, Progressive Conservative and New Democratic parties. The principles, in the order stated in the regulation are:

Legitimacy

"The electoral system should have the confidence of Ontarians and reflect their values."

An electoral system must inspire confidence in both its process and its results. If a system reflects the remaining principles, it's likely to be seen as legitimate.

Fairness of Representation

"The Legislative Assembly should reflect the population of Ontario in accordance with demographic representation, proportionality and representation by population among other factors." The Citizens' Assembly regulation states three ways to think about representation:

Demographic representation (i.e., the members of the legislature reflect the makeup of the province's population, e.g., in terms of gender, age and ethno-cultural identity); *proportionality* (the proportion of seats that a party wins is roughly equal to the proportion of votes that it receives in the election); and *representation by population* (that each vote carry equal weight in electing representatives to the legislature).

Voter Choice

"An electoral system should promote voter choice in terms of quantity and quality of options available to voters."

Quantity refers to the range of choices voters have on the ballot. Quality of choice means that voters feel they have a meaningful choice to make on Election Day. They have the opportunity to select from among candidates or parties who represent genuinely different approaches to governing.

Effective Parties

"Political parties should be able to structure public debate, mobilize and engage the electorate, and develop policy alternatives."

Political parties play an essential role in democracies. They attract members who share similar beliefs and develop policies that reflect their goals and priorities. Parties also promote public debate on important issues. Whether you think parties are effective depends on what you think they should do and how you think they should do it. In some systems, only major parties tend to win seats. In others, small parties can obtain some representation. Some systems make it easier for parties to succeed if their support is distributed over the whole province or country. Others favour parties with support concentrated in a specific region.

Stable and Effective Government

"The electoral system should contribute to continuity of government, and governments should be able to develop and implement their agendas and take decisive action when required."

An effective government can manage the affairs of the province and carry out the policy platform that the party (or parties) set out during the election campaign. A government is also effective if it can make decisions and take action quickly when needed. Canadians often associate stability with single-party majority governments, where one party has a majority (50% plus 1) of seats in the legislature. Other major democracies, such as France and Germany, have experience with stable coalition governments, where two or more parties govern together and usually have a majority of seats between them.

Effective Parliament

“The Legislative Assembly should include a government and opposition, and should be able to perform its parliamentary functions successfully.”

An effective legislature has an effective government and an effective opposition. The opposition parties must be able to watch the government closely and present alternatives to the government’s positions.

Stronger Voter Participation

“Ontario’s electoral system should promote voter participation as well as engagement with the broader democratic process.”

People may be more likely to vote, or to participate more generally in the political process, if they have confidence in the electoral system and believe their votes will make a difference.

Accountability

“Ontario voters should be able to identify decision-makers and hold them to account.”

Different electoral systems produce different types of governments. Governments can be made up of one party that is accountable for decisions or two or more parties that share accountability. The lines of accountability are different depending on whether the electoral system allows voters to vote for a local candidate, a party, or both.

The Citizens’ Assembly has also identified two other features of an electoral system that should be considered – **Simplicity and Practicality**.

It would be difficult for any one electoral system to reflect all of these principles and characteristics fully or even to the same degree. Electoral system experts often say that choosing an electoral system involves trade-offs, or give and take, between a number of desirable principles and objectives. And as important as electoral systems are, there are limits to what any system, by itself, can accomplish. Many other factors, such as the quality of political leadership, the nomination process for candidates, and the rules of the legislature influence how well the principles people value will be reflected.

Examples of Electoral Systems

In its learning phase, the Citizens’ Assembly examined a number of electoral systems and

identified several “families” of systems, based on three basic elements:

- the number of representatives elected in each electoral district (riding)
- the electoral formula or rules for determining who wins the seat or seats
- the type of ballot.

1. Plurality (often called the “First Past the Post” system), including:

Single Member Plurality (SMP) used in Ontario and all other Canadian provinces, as well as Ghana, India, Kenya, Malaysia, Trinidad & Tobago, United Kingdom, United States and other countries.

The winner needs more votes than any other candidate, but not a majority of all votes cast.

2. Majority, including:

Alternative Vote (AV) used in Australia, Fiji and New Guinea.

Voters indicate first choice, second choice, third choice, etc. If first-round voting does not yield a majority of votes for any candidate, the candidate with the least votes is eliminated and second choices of those who voted for that candidate are applied. This process is continued with remaining choices until one candidate emerges with a majority of the votes.

Two-Round System (TRS) used in Egypt, France, Mali, Togo, Uzbekistan, Vietnam and other countries.

If no candidate emerges with a majority, a second round of voting is held, usually a week or two later. The most common type is a run-off between the two leading candidates.

3. Proportional Representation (PR), including:

List PR used in Argentina, Brazil, Czech Republic, Greece, Portugal, South Africa, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland and other countries.

Each party presents a ballot with its candidates listed in the order in which it wants them to be elected. Allows party to promote the election of its leader, women, minority candidates, etc. Seats won by a party (proportionally to votes cast for them) will be filled in order, starting at the top (closed list); the order of the candidates may be changed by

voters (open list); or, as in Switzerland, the ranking of candidates is done by voters, regardless of party.

Single Transferable Vote (STV) used in Australia (for Federal/Senate elections), Malta and the Republic of Ireland.

Candidates rank their choices as for Alternative Vote. Establishes a minimum number of votes (quota) for a candidate to be elected. Ballots cast for a winning candidate in excess of the quota will have their second-choice vote applied.

4. Mixed, including:

Mixed Member Proportional (MMP) used in Bolivia, Germany, Lesotho, Mexico, New Zealand, Venezuela and other countries.

Each party's share of the vote determines its share of seats in the legislature, which will be filled first by local candidates who were elected.

Parallel Systems used in Japan, Pakistan, the Philippines, Russia, South Korea and other countries.

Usually allow voters to vote for a local candidate using a majority or plurality formula, but also for a party through a List PR system. Two simultaneous but parallel elections are held. However, parties are not compensated for disproportional results.

There are a number of avenues for participating in the Citizens' Assembly:

- Sending written comments by **January 15, 2007**, online, by mail or by fax.
- Attending a consultation meeting from **mid-November 2006 to late January 2007** (see dates in Halton) and participating in the discussion.
- Making a presentation at a consultation meeting. To do so, prior registration is required online or by phone.

Citizens' Assembly Consultations in Halton will be held:

Oakville, Wednesday, November 22, 2006

7:00 pm – 10:00 pm

Oakville Public Library (Central Branch),
120 Navy St., Oakville

Burlington, Thursday, January 18, 2007

7:00 pm – 10:00 pm

Location to be determined

Georgetown, Thursday, November 23, 2006

7:00 pm – 9:00 pm

Mold-Masters Sportsplex, 221 Guelph St.,
Georgetown

This is an informal information session (not a formal consultation)

Phone

General information about the process is available toll free by calling 1- 866-656-9908 or contact the Citizens' Assembly Secretariat directly at 416-325-0758.

A TTY line is available for the hearing impaired at 1-800-387-5559.

Email

Questions or remarks can be emailed to info@citizensassembly.gov.on.ca.

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