



Focus on Electoral Reform

Ontario Referendum: On October 10, 2007, Ontario voters will decide whether or not to adopt a new system of voting in provincial elections.

The government passed legislation last year which mandated the establishment of a Citizens' Assembly on Electoral Reform, much like what was done in British Columbia. The Citizens' Assembly's 103 members were randomly selected in June 2006. Their mandate was to examine Ontario's current electoral system and learn about other systems.

Between September 2006 and April 2007 the Citizens' Assembly heard submissions at province-wide public meetings, examined on-line submissions, and were instructed by academics versed in electoral systems world-wide. At the end of the process, their mandate directed them to recommend either keeping our current electoral system or adopting a new one.

On April 15 the Citizens' Assembly made their decision – to recommend changing our voting system. As per

the legislation, the government will put the question to voters in a province-wide referendum to be held in conjunction with the October 10, 2007 provincial election.

What's Wrong With Our Current System?

Encourages Voting for What We Don't Want: Ontario's (and Canada's) current electoral system is based on the winner-take-all principle. Voters just get to elect one member for their constituency, and their party's candidate either wins or loses. Unfortunately, this kind of system encourages "strategic voting", some feel pressured to vote against a party they hate rather than for a party they actually support. They think their preferred party's local candidate isn't likely to win, so they try to prevent a candidate they hate from winning by voting for a candidate they dislike. Many others just stop voting, and voter apathy increases.

"Strategic voting" bleeds votes from parties seen as not able to win. Worse, this skews perceptions of the electorate's overall preferences, reduces the political influence of the

underdog party, and creates ongoing obstacles to its long term growth. Worst of all, attempts to vote strategically often go awry, as provincial or national trends don't hold up locally, and one's preferred party may actually hold a better chance than one's second choice at defeating the candidate one strongly opposes.

Poor Equity Representation: Compared to other countries, Canada has a very low percentage of women in Parliament. Our country now ranks 42nd among world democracies, behind countries such as Portugal, Pakistan, and Rwanda. Canada leads the other western democracies that still use first-past-the-post systems (Britain and the US) with 21% women, but lags behind all the other major western democracies that use some form of Proportional Representation. Ontario's representation of women in 2003 was the same as Canada's average: 21%.

All Votes Are Not Equal: Under the current system, the value of our votes depends on what party we happen to support in a given election. In the last provincial election, for example, the Liberals gained an average of one seat in the Legislature for every 29,000 votes cast for their party. By contrast, the NDP won only one seat for every 94,000 votes cast

for them. In other words, the votes of Liberal supporters counted for over three times as much as NDP supporters. To take a federal example, 2.1 million NDP voters elected only 19 MPs while fewer than 1.7 million BLOC supporters elected 54 MPs.



Phony Majorities: When the voting system doesn't treat all votes equally, election results are distorted. From 1980 to 2003, Canadians had 64 provincial elections, with 37 (or 58%) producing phony majority governments, in which a party that failed to capture a majority of the popular vote is able to gain a solid majority of seats and 100 percent of the legislative power. In other words, in six out of ten provincial elections over the past two and half decades, a minority was empowered to rule as if it was a majority. The 1937 election was the last time a legitimate majority government was elected in Ontario.

Mixed Member Proportional (MMP)

The system recommended as a better alternative by the Citizens' Assembly is Mixed Member Proportional (MMP). This is the system also supported by the labour movement and other progressive organizations. It is currently in use in Germany, New Zealand, Mexico and several other countries.

One of the reasons for the widespread support for MMP is that it is seen as the best option for promoting equal representation in the Legislature for women and minorities. MMP combines a number of seats elected by our traditional First-Past-The-Post (FPTP) system with a proportionality feature. The proportional element that makes sure seats in the Legislature reflect each party's votes would come from lists nominated by each political party. This would create balance and greater fairness – combining a local MPP for one's home district with enough extra MPPs to put the Legislature into proportion based on the popular vote received by each party. Voters get one vote for their local MPP, and one for their preferred party.

The Citizens' Assembly hopes that when political parties present their list

candidates for election, that they will have chosen them democratically by some system of voting by their membership.

The Citizens' Assembly is also recommending that the number of seats in the Legislature be increased back to its pre-Mike Harris level in order to allow for good proportional results.

The Legislature was adjusted from 125 to 130 before the 1987 election to take account of population growth. It was due for another increase after the 1996 census but instead the Harris Tories cut the number of MPPs to 107.



The Citizens' Assembly is proposing to increase the number of seats to 129. Ninety would be constituency seats (MPPs representing ridings as in our current system) and 39 would be list seats (each party would put

forward a province-wide list of their “non-constituency” candidates).

This compromise system is a good fit with our existing political culture because we retain our traditional local representation.

At the same time, the list feature puts a great deal of pressure on the parties to balance their lists of candidates on the basis of gender, race, ethnicity and other equity factors.

More information on electoral reform can be found on the Citizens' Assembly website at www.citizensassembly.gov.on.ca

Obstacles to Success

One major obstacle to success is that the government has established a “super-majority” threshold in order for the referendum to succeed; 60% of voters must support the change and over half the voters in over half the ridings must also vote yes.

Another major flaw in this process is the unrealistic time lines that have been set by the government. The referendum vote will take place at the time of the general election on October 10, 2007. Given that summer is now about two months away and shortly after Labour Day we will be in a provincial election campaign, there is virtually no time for public education on this matter. Combined with the fact that the

media has until just recently been uninterested in covering the issue, we risk having a very uninformed public casting ballots in a referendum that could change politics in this province for generations to come. Without a thorough understanding by the public of what is being proposed, the government is simply setting up a process that is doomed to fail from the very start. That would indeed be a lost opportunity to create a voting system that would truly represent all members of our province.

What Can You Do?

1. Support Fair Vote Ontario's YES campaign by making a donation and/or volunteering to get involved in this campaign.
www.fairvotecanada.org
2. Stay tuned for further updates in OFL and your union's publications.
3. Invite Fair Vote and OFL speakers to your local meetings, workshops, etc.

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