

Community Dispatch

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REPORT OF THE CITIZENS' ASSEMBLY ON ELECTORAL REFORM

In November 2006 (Community Dispatch Vol. 11, No 3) Community Development Halton outlined the initiative known as the Ontario Citizens' Assembly on Electoral Reform and encouraged residents of Halton to engage in one of the several avenues for participation in this exciting process of assessment and renewal of our electoral system.

*After eight months of learning, consulting and deliberating, the Citizens' Assembly has completed its task and formulated its recommendations. The Citizens' Assembly presented its final report to the Government and people of Ontario on May 15, 2007. It recommended that Ontario move to a **Mixed Member Proportional** electoral system and that this recommendation be presented on the ballot as a referendum question during the next provincial general election on October 10, 2007.*

It is with gratitude to our fellow citizens, who devoted much time, energy and thought to serve as members of the Citizens' Assembly, that we present a synopsis of their recommendations. Much of the following is extracted from the final report of the Citizens' Assembly, "One Ballot, Two Votes". We urge all Ontarians to give serious consideration to the recommendations and to work to ensure that they, and fellow members of the electorate, are informed and committed to participating knowledgeably in the referendum on Oct 10. The full report and more information can be found on the Citizens' Assembly website at www.citizensassembly.gov.on.ca.

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Background

In the words of its Chair, the Citizens' Assembly "successfully modeled a new kind of democratic decision-making unprecedented in Ontario. It demonstrated the value of involving citizens in important policy questions." The Assembly's mandate was to assess Ontario's electoral system and other systems and recommend whether the province should keep its current system or adopt a different one.

The Citizens' Assembly was established by a regulation under *Ontario's Elections Act* and is independent of government. Its members include 103 randomly- selected citizens (one from each of Ontario's electoral districts) and the Chair. The membership is diverse in terms of age, ethnicity, educational background, occupation and political perspective.

The Citizens' Assembly process provided all Ontarians an opportunity to learn more about Ontario's current electoral system and alternatives in use around the world, and to decide which one they think is best for this province. Our *Community Dispatch* of November 2006 (Vol. 11, No. 3) outlines more fully the principles examined by the Assembly and the various electoral systems they studied.

Over the past eight months, the Assembly was engaged in an intensive process of learning, consultation and deliberation, inviting Ontarians to add their voices to this important process by making presentations and written

submissions or attending one of the 41 public consultation sessions across Ontario.

In all, about 3,000 Ontario residents participated in the Citizens' Assembly process. Based on what Ontarians told them about the principles they value, the Assembly developed **three priority objectives**:

1. **Greater voter choice**
2. **Strong local representation**
3. **Fairer election results** (i.e., that the number of seats a party wins should more closely reflect its share of the popular vote)

After careful consideration of the principles underlying a wide range of systems, and their relative strengths and weaknesses in light of the three priority objectives, Assembly members voted to recommend that Ontario move to an electoral system known as a **Mixed Member Proportional (MMP)** system, designed to preserve the local representation we now have and add new elements to produce election results which are more proportional to the popular vote.

What is a Mixed Member Proportional (MMP) system?

A **Mixed Member Proportional** system combines the ability to elect one member from each electoral district with "proportionality" (i.e., that a party's share of seats in the legislature will be more nearly proportional to its total popular vote across the province). To accomplish this, the Ontario Citizens' Assembly recommends that the number of electoral districts (commonly referred to as "ridings") be reduced to 90, from the current 103. These 90 electoral district (or *local*) seats would be filled, as now, by the election of *local members* through a simple plurality (i.e., the candidate with the most votes is elected to

that seat). However, the Citizens' Assembly also suggests that the legislature include an additional 39 *list* seats, which would be used to "top up" parties representation in order to ensure that their share of seats in the legislature reflects their share of the popular vote.

MMP systems are currently used, with some variations, in Germany, New Zealand, Scotland and Wales, among other jurisdictions.

How Does MMP Work?

In the form of MMP recommended by the Citizens' Assembly, voters may cast two votes on a single ballot. On one part of the ballot, voters may select an individual candidate to fill their local electoral district seat. As in Ontario's current system, these votes are tallied locally and the candidate with more votes than any other individual candidate (a plurality) wins that electoral district (or *local*) seat.

On the other part of the ballot, voters may also cast an additional vote for a political party. They may choose the same party as is represented by their selected local candidate or a different party. These votes are tallied province-wide; the share of votes for a particular party (the *party* vote) is what we are accustomed to think of as the "popular vote" and determines the total share of seats in the legislature to which that party is entitled. This is then compared to the number of seats each party has won in individual electoral districts. Any party which has not won enough electoral district *local* seats to fully reflect its share of the party vote is topped-up with the appropriate number of seats from the additional 39 *list* seats in the legislature.

As an example, if Party A captures 35% of the popular (or *party*) vote, it is entitled to 35% of the seats in the legislature. If it won only 28% of the seats in the legislature through the election of *local* members, it would be compensated with enough additional seats for *list* members to bring its total representation in the legislature up to 35%.

These seats are filled by candidates from the party list, published prior to the election, in the order in which they appear on the list. *List* members do not, therefore, represent a particular electoral district, but rather serve as “at large” members of their political party. The Citizens’ Assembly believes that the MMP system and the use of party *lists*, creates opportunities to bring new perspectives to the legislature, and for parties to select *list* candidates to increase the presence in the legislature of women and other underrepresented citizens.

How Is the Government Formed?

Because each party is awarded seats in proportion to its share of the popular (*party*) vote, a single party majority government can be formed only if one party wins a majority (i.e., more than 50%) of the popular vote. The Citizens’ Assembly notes that the last time a party was given a majority of voter support in an Ontario provincial election was 1937, and that a single-party majority government is unlikely. A party with more seats than any other could form a single party minority government, with the formal or informal support of other parties; however, the Citizens’ Assembly believes that the more likely outcome is the formation of a coalition majority government. The Citizens’ Assembly found that these governments are as stable and effective as single-party majority governments; that coalition majority governments may discourage the abrupt shifts

in policy that often occur when there is a change in the party in power; and that they may lessen the adversarial environment in the legislature.

What Happens Next?

The Government of Ontario has committed to including a referendum question on the ballot for the next provincial general election on October 10, 2007. For the province to move to MMP, the question must meet a double threshold, achieving 60% of voter support across the province, and a majority of voters in 60% of electoral districts. Participation is crucial to the outcome. In 2005, a similar referendum question in British Columbia received a majority in 77 of 79 electoral districts, but fell short of the required 60% of overall voter support by 2.31%.

The Citizens’ Assembly has also developed additional recommendations (see below). Some pertain to preparing voters for the referendum. We urge all Ontarians to work to ensure that they, and their fellow members of the electorate, are informed, equipped and committed to participating knowledgeably in the referendum on October 10, and to avail themselves of additional materials available from the Citizens’ Assembly at www.citizensassembly.gov.on.ca.

SUMMARY OF ADDITIONAL RECOMMENDATIONS ON RELATED ISSUES

In addition to the primary recommendation, that Ontario move to a **Mixed Member Proportional** electoral system, the Assembly has made recommendations pertaining to three additional issues that were frequently raised by the members of the public who participated in the public consultations: voter participation; the nomination of local candidates; and the upcoming referendum.

The recommendations may be found in full in *One Ballot, Two Votes: A New Way to Vote in Ontario. Recommendations of the Ontario Citizens' Assembly on Electoral Reform* at www.citizensassembly.gov.on.ca

VOTER PARTICIPATION

The Assembly's final report includes recommendations that government and other organizations work together to:

- Build public understanding of the importance of elections, the broader political process, and the ways in which all citizens can participate in this process.
- Ensure that all Ontario high school students graduate with a good working knowledge of our democratic system and understand the importance of voting, and provide opportunities to engage youth in the political process.
- Continue the process of removing the barriers that prevent people from participating fully in elections and in the political process more generally. The Assembly believes that accessibility for people with disabilities and for those who face language, literacy and other barriers must be a central consideration in all efforts to increase voter participation.

NOMINATION OF LOCAL CANDIDATES

The Assembly's proposal for a Mixed Member Proportional system includes the

recommendation that list candidates and the process parties use to nominate them should be well known to voters before they vote. The Assembly did not make a recommendation to change the process by which parties nominate their local candidates. However, the Assembly believes that the same type of transparency, with attention to achieving greater gender balance and reflecting Ontario's diverse population should apply to local candidate nominations. This would contribute to the legitimacy of the electoral system and citizens' confidence in the political process.

THE REFERENDUM (Oct. 10, 2007)

The Assembly recommends a simple yes/no question that should inform voters that the recommendation for the new system was made by the Citizens' Assembly and believes the question should ask the voters whether Ontario should adopt the Mixed Member Proportional electoral system recommended by the Citizens' Assembly on Electoral Reform.

The Assembly believes that a comprehensive, well-funded public education about the proposed MMP system, beginning in May and continuing through to the referendum, is vital.



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