

# Form of proportional representation proposed for Ontario

By Bill Rea

An expanded Ontario legislature, with roughly 30 per cent of the members being appointed by the various political parties, is being proposed.

The Ontario Citizens' Assembly on Electoral Reform has come up with a recommendation for a mixed member proportional (MMP) model for the

province.

This recommendation was made public last week, and further details are expected next month, when the assembly issues its final report.

The assembly was formed by the provincial government, consisting of a chair, George Thomson, who was appointed by the government, and 103 other

members, with one person being chosen randomly from each of the 103 electoral ridings in Ontario. Aurora resident John Reston is the member from Vaughan — King — Aurora and Edmund James of East Gwillimbury is from York North. It was brought together to examine Ontario's electoral system and learn about other systems. They also consulted with the public through meetings and written submissions.

Reston was enthusiastic in his support of the recommendation, while James was one of eight assembly members who opposed it.

In announcing the recommendation, the assembly stated MMP preserves the best features of the current electoral system in Ontario, in the form of strong local representation, while adding elements aimed at better reflecting the proportional desires of the electorate.

The proposal calls for a legislature of 129 seats, up from the current 103. Of that, 90 of the MPPs will be elected the way they are now. The other 39 will be distributed according to the percentage of votes the various parties receive at election time.

Voters will get to cast two votes when they go to the polls; one for the local candidate and one for the party they favour, and it will be the party votes that determine how the 39 seats are distributed. The recommendations also call on each party to nominate a slate of candidates and publish the process used to compile the list.

"I was very much in favour of what was done," Reston commented last week.

He said the assembly held two votes. One was whether to support MMP over the current system, sometimes referred to as "first passed the post." That vote carried 86-16, then the vote for the assembly to recommend MMP passed 94-8.

"We're quite excited about that," he commented. "We will have done our best."

"We'll see what the citizens of Ontario think about it," he added.

The final report will be put to the government, with the possibility that it will form a referendum question on the ballot of the next provincial election, expected in October.

Reston said he's heard no plans of anyone taking a role as active proponent for this

proposal, adding he's read the government of Premier Dalton McGuinty plans to be neutral on the question. But he also pointed out it was the government that got the whole process going.

He also expressed the hope that the government is going to adequately fund an education program on this. He recalled a previous similar exercise in British Columbia was not properly funded, but it almost got through. A 60 per cent majority was needed, and 57 per cent voted in favour.

"Sixty per cent is a pretty high bar to jump over," he observed.

Reston said there has been a lot of talk about proportional representation. Under the current system, a party can garner less than 40 per cent of the vote in an election, but seat most of the members in the legislature, giving it 100 per cent of the power. He pointed out that getting less than half the vote means "that everybody else voted against them."

He also said this is not likely to solve all the concerns. "No election system is perfect, not even the one we recommended," he remarked.

Reston added the assembly is slated to meet one more time to put the finishing touches on its report. It's deadline is May 15.

"Then that'll be it," he said. "I won't actively lobby for it, but if I'm asked to speak on its behalf, I certainly will."

James, in an address to his colleagues, lobbied for the status-quo, "the grand, time-honoured Westminster system."

He argued that single-member plurality (SMP) leads to government that gets things done, while it's the special interest groups that believe coalitions work better for them.

"SMP is people oriented, rather than just lists for parties, and includes women

politicians and party members, gays and people for ethnic families," he said.

"Constituency citizens can relate to one of their own Members of Parliament, who is accessible, and most of them are," James added. "But with MMP, there will be bigger ridings in 90 constituencies, approximately 143,000 people compared to presently 125,000."

"Today, everybody has a competitive chance in 'first past the post,' including new parties," James argued. "Naturally, such as in some start-up businesses, it's not easy, neither is winning the Stanley Cup or an Olympic medal, but determined people do it, and most of the competitors never think their time is wasted. They have to try harder or realize they belong on another team or do something else altogether."

James also suggested political reform might be considered first, citing what he called "the historic Westminster tradition" of backbenchers rising up against the leaders.

King Councillor Bill Cober had brought the matter up with his colleagues late last year, expressing frustration that few people seemed to know about the assembly, and not much has changed since then.

"The biggest concern I had and still have is they're not communicating with the public," he said, adding the fact the government is not trying to promote the effort indicates they really aren't interested in change.

Cober also expressed a couple of problems with the recommendation, commenting that a list of "star candidates" will take away from the elected officials.

"I think it's a good thing to look at," he concluded. "I'm not 100 per cent sold on it."



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