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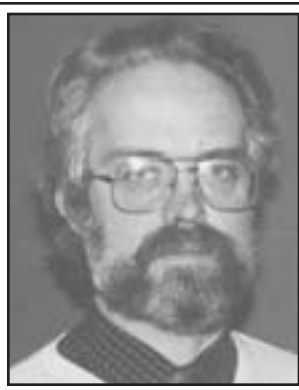
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*Bill's
Bulletin
Board*

By Bill Rea

I feel sort of a grudging respect for the work that has been done by the Ontario Citizen's Assembly on Electoral Reform.

At first glance, the preliminary suggestion that have come up with, of a mixed member proportional (MMP) system, is intriguing and might actually be workable.

On the other hand, I have spent more than 20 years watching the workings of government in this country and province, and I have developed a bit of a cynical outlook. I'm willing to predict that nothing is going to come of this work.

True, it will likely be the subject of a referendum in this fall's provincial election, but without a strong and organized faction acting as a proponent, I don't see how it has a hope of passing, especially since we're told it would have to pass by a "super majority," according to last Monday's Toronto Star (that means the support of 60 per cent of the electorate, with more than 50 per cent in at least 64 ridings). Frankly, I have no problem with the "super

majority" notion. Substantive electoral reform in a democracy requires a spotlessly clear mandate from the electorate, and 50 per cent plus one in an electoral setting in which at least 30 per cent of the electorate is not likely to vote is clearly very far from spotless.

In essence, MMP would see 129 MPPs in the provincial legislature. For me, that's good news right off the bat. It scraps one of the more bubble-headed ideas that Mike Harris came up with when he ruled Ontario, that provincial riding boundaries should mirror their federal counterparts. That was one of many things that made me cynical when I hear governments talk of parliamentary reform, because its only benefits were more cosmetic than anything else. The result is there would be 90 provincial ridings, electing MPPs pretty much the way they are now. The other 39 will be apportioned through a version of proportional representation, meaning they will be based on the percentage of the popular

vote a party receives in the general election. In this case, the Citizen's Assembly proposes that people cast two votes; one for the person they want to be MPP and the other for the party they want to govern them.

I like that. There have been a lot of occasions over the more than 30 years that I have been eligible to vote that I've had to decide between the person I want to be my representative in the legislature and the party policies I want to run things. And no, that is not contradictory, not if you accept that effective opposition is a crucial part of parliamentary government. True, some 30 per cent of the legislature would be occupied by party appointees, but is that really anything new? We're always hearing cases of party brass parachuting candidates into certain ridings (and to hell with what the local riding associations might think), whether it be to obtain a certain gender or ethnic mix, or because someone is owed a favour.

So while I might be able to go along with what the Citizens' Assembly has proposed (assuming it can get by the referendum this fall), I'm not entirely sold on it.

I have gone on the record in the past as not being a fan of proportional representation. While it might be more reflective of the will of the electorate on much broader level, I think it would do a bad job local-

ly. And one complaint we hear too much of, when it comes to government today, is people feel disenfranchised and without representation.

After the 2004 federal election, I consulted Elections Canada data, and found the Green party attracted some 583,000 votes, or roughly 4.3 per cent of the total. In a 308-seat Parliament, they would have been expecting 13 seats, under proportional representation.

But the fact is that while the Greens boasted they had candidates in every riding in the country, the official results indicated they elected no one and none of these standard bearers even came close. There were only three ridings where they got better than 10 per cent of the vote (two in British Columbia and one in Alberta). Andrew Lewis, running in Saanich — Gulf Island, was tops in his party, with 10,662 votes, good for 16.7 per cent. But he still finished fourth in a five-way race.

Given the best-case scenario with proportional representation, residents of 13 ridings would have been represented in Ottawa by MPs who at least 83 per cent of the electorate voted against. All of a sudden, that doesn't sound too democratic.

More effective electoral reform could be achieved through the use of a preferential ballot, in which voters are allowed to pick their

first, second and third choices. Political parties have used that method in the past for nominating candidates. That was used last month when federal Conservatives in Oak Ridges — Markham nominated Paul Calandra for the next campaign. I believe this would give people the chance to vote for the individual candidate of their choice, even if that person is carrying the colours of one of the minor parties, without the fear that they might be wasting their vote. And if their person can't get elected, they at least can throw some influence the way of another candidate who might be tolerable.

But reforming the way we elect people to Parliament is one thing that could maybe stand some adjustment. What about the way they are used when they get elected?

I think we need some meaningful steps being taken toward having members being more accountable to the people who elected them, rather than to some leader or power block at the top that don't have to answer to me or you.

I still puzzle that Stephen Harper and people around him were somehow able to turn a life-long Conservative like Garth Turner into a Liberal.

Here I am sounding cynical again, but don't hold your breath waiting for any government to appoint a Citizens' Assembly to address questions like that.

Editorial

Taxes likely would be higher with pooling

When Finance Minister (and Vaughan — King — Aurora MPP) Greg Sorbara announced in his budget last month that pooling among the municipalities in the Greater Toronto Area (GTA) was going to be phased out, a lot of politicians in York Region (and other regions too, for that matter) cheered.

Although pooling was established with good intentions, namely to prevent City of Toronto taxpayers from footing an excessive share of the bill for social programs, it was still a sore point with politicians outside the megacity, who were obliged to collect taxes from their constituents and then send that money to 100 Queen St. West in Toronto. Once there, regional officials, in York and elsewhere, had no control over what was done with that money.

That is not something that any elected official

wants try and explain to their taxpaying public. It also stands to reason that when some of these politicians were cornered with questions from constituents about taxes, a lot of them would have pointed a finger of blame at the infamous GTA pooling.

So it's easy to understand why they would have cheered Sorbara's announcement.

But we fear they may have set their expectations a little higher than they should have.

It became clear during Thursday's debate of the Regional budget that several councillors had envisioned that the phasing out of pooling was going to result in adjusted tax rates. There was never much of an indication what tax levels some of these councillors had in mind, but a couple of them made it clear that the 4.8 per

cent increase was not what they were expecting. We suspect some of them might have been spreading the word among their constituents to expect something a lot less.

Now there are some realities at work here.

None of us particularly enjoy paying taxes, and we suspect not a single person reading these words will argue with that last point. Most of us pay our taxes grudgingly because we know we have to, and because the money is necessary if we're going to have the services that we have come to expect from government.

And as Mayor Margaret Black indicated, York does have a lot of very demanding taxpayers.

Another reality is those demands are going to increase. People bringing up the end of the post-war baby

boom are looking at the "Big Five-Oh," while their older fellows are looking at retirement, if they're not already there.

That means that a demanding taxpaying public is likely going to get more demanding in the years to come.

And then there's the growth that's coming to York. King is going to experience a very limited amount of that growth, but other parts of the Region are going to feel a lot more of it. Whether we like it or not, it's coming and it's going to increase the demand that Black alluded to.

That means there's a lot of work to do, and money to be spent, with the prospect of debt being incurred.

Now debt is not necessarily a bad thing. If you have a mortgage, look around your house and realize that it was the ability to

enter into controlled debt that enable you buy it. But also realize the less debt you carry, the better.

Thus Regional councillors opted to focus the savings realized this year from GTA pooling toward keeping York's debt down.

Although it might be hard to grasp now, by reducing future debt, Regional councillors are avoiding future debt costs, which would have to be paid through some method, probably taxation.

An immediate tax break? It sure sounds great. Show us one politician would wouldn't enjoy selling that to constituents. Investing funds toward reducing taxes a couple of years in the future? That's a harder sell. But the product benefits the electorate in the long-run.

And isn't that where municipal politicians should be aiming their efforts?