

Electoral reform a tricky issue

This is serious stuff.

Due to the outcry in some quarters that majority governments in Ontario are often elected without receiving a majority of votes, the Liberal government has decided to follow British Columbia's lead and investigate alternatives.

The McGuinty Liberals have selected a citizens' panel to report on electoral reform by May 15 in preparation for a referendum in concert with the October 2007 provincial general election.

There is one representative from each riding in Ontario on the panel.

In a referendum, British Columbians narrowly rejected the fairly complex proposal for proportional representation that their citizens' panel put forward.

In a nutshell, proportional representation seeks to redress the balance of elected officials to better reflect the overall proportion of the vote that each party received. There are many ways in which to approach this.

While I would never suggest stifling debate on this important issue, I do have several concerns. First, it appears that the most successful jurisdictions in the world subscribe to our current system. At the same time many places that have adopted some form of proportional representation turn into financial basket cases. Under proportional representation coalitions are required to govern. These alliances between parties are bought and paid for with taxpayers' money through promises to enact new programs.

A second issue is the approach. Before taking on electoral reform I believe it is necessary to look closely at meaningful parliamentary reform. That is we should change the way the business of parliament in

Ted Chudleigh



Ontario is conducted and then use that as a springboard to further reform if necessary.

The problem of cynicism and distrust of the political process has little to do with how politicians are elected and more to do with how the system functions once they are elected. It is that system which needs meaningful reform.

The Liberals are unlikely to shift the current focus of the citizens' panel. While they will put the proposal of the citizens' panel to a referendum, it is important that if changes are made that they require a second referendum after a reasonable period, to cement any changes. Any government elected under a new system will be reluctant to change it. Requiring a second approval through referendum is prudent.

Experience in British Columbia has shown that those campaigning for office are reluctant to take a position on proportional representation for fear of alienating voters. There must be an attempt made to keep public debate outside of the normal cut and thrust of political discourse.

It will be interesting to see what the citizens' panel recommend. Then the real debate will begin.

—Ted Chudleigh is the MPP for Halton

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