

## reflections on the citizen's assembly

March 10, 2007.

The process for electoral reform in Ontario is grinding its way to the finish. The assembly has narrowed options down to two systems and will choose one in the next weeks.

If you read my articles, you know I am a supporter of a party list system. But a list system is not going to be, at least not for now. So now it is time to take a step back and re-evaluate the situation.

The assembly is choosing between mixed member proportional (MMP) and single transferable vote (STV). More about these below. And there is now a lot of friction among the assembly and especially with their 'secretariat'. They feel hurried; they wanted to look at more options.

The judge who is the appointed chairman of the assembly, and the civil servant assigned to co-ordinate staff work, are both under pressure from the government. They are being forced to shorten the process and reduce expenses.

Some of the assembly are frustrated. They want to look at more systems. They have developed a real sense of responsibility and ownership of the process. They feel that if they must try to justify and 'sell' to the public what they have done, they must show that they looked at all options.

## a cultural thing

We must be a bunch of 'Anglo-Saxon' people, still, in Canada. This is what English speaking people are usually called by writers from other cultural heritages. The assembly favours MMP and STV. These are the systems usually proposed in the 'Anglo-Saxon world' as alternatives to the 'single member districts' which we use now in Canada.

The systems usually favoured by 'non Anglo-Saxon' countries when they move away from single member district legislatures is; the party list system. It is by far the most commonly used system in the world now.

I have preached mightily for party list systems before the assembly, to no avail. It does not 'click' with these 'Anglo-Saxons'. Most of the people who also argued for it were immigrants from countries where list systems were used.

## MMP, briefly

MMP means electing some of our legislators in single district seats, as we do now, and some from a party list. There are some variations on this. Basically, if party A gets 10% of the vote and wins five seats, and there are 50 district seats and 50 list seats, it gets five of the list seats as well.

One problem with this is called 'overhang'. For example, when party B gets 30 district seats but only 25% of the vote. There are several creative ways of dealing with this problem to keep the seat number proportional to the popular vote.

MMP actually started in Germany. The British imposed it on the Germans when they occupied them at the end of the last world war. The Germans have got used to it. Lately, New Zealand has adopted it. The Scots and Welsh parliaments now use it. There is a movement for the United Kingdom parliament to adopt it.

Some non 'Anglo-Saxon' countries have adopted MMP, but political scientists notice that in these countries, MMP seems like a transition stage between single member districts and pure list systems.

### STV, briefly.

STV means electing members of parliament by a preferential voting system in multi member constituencies. If district A is allotted 5 seats, each party puts up a slate of five candidates there. The voters rate all these candidates in order. In some systems, voters can vote for one party, the 'straight ticket', or for candidates they like from various parties.

The first choice, then second, third, and so on are counted, with the lowest candidate dropped off in each round. A candidate is elected when his or her vote total reaches the 'quota'; a formula, usually the number of seats divided by the number of votes plus one.

Problems; it has happened that they got to the end of the count and did not have all the seats filled yet. And politicians from the same party must compete against each other, which weakens political parties.

STV has been used in Ireland and Malta for 80 years. They are both island countries with small populations, strongly influenced by the Catholic church, and were long under British rule.

### What now.

The assembly has not worked out the details of these two plans, but we will be voting on one of them this October. Most Ontarians are still unaware that all this is going on.

The new voting system will have to pass by 60% in a referendum held concurrently with the provincial election. British Columbia had a citizen's assembly. It chose an STV system. It also had to pass by 60%. It got 57%. B.C. is trying again in 2009.

There are movements for voting reform in several other provinces, despite intense hostility toward it. The reason all this is happening is that the present 'majoritarian' system is breaking down. It was designed for two political parties.

Political scientists who study voting systems have observed that when a majoritarian country or province gets three or four 'effective' political parties, ones able to win seats, it is eventually forced to go to a proportional system. Elections become too unpredictable and contrary to the voter's desires.

But much of the 'intelligentsia' in Ontario are rabidly hostile to any change. That is why we hear little about the assembly, most of it negative, in the media. We have a classic conflict between the absolute necessity of change and a 'bitter end' resistance from those whose sense of identity and well being is tied up in the status quo.

This means we are in for a long and nasty period of conflict before our new voting system is settled in Ontario and in Canada. We are now at the start of it.

### beyond proportionality

Canada is very backward. Most established democracies have had proportional systems for 50 or 100 years. Proportional systems bring about a more co-operative, consensus style of government, as opposed to the 'we win, you lose' mentality that goes with what we have now.

In many countries, they are making progress toward direct and participatory democracy; real democracy, not partial democracy. There is the now famous participatory budget process of Porto Alegre, Brazil, in which every citizen participates in planning and budget decisions. It is being imitated all over the world.

In Germany, 'planning cells' are a well developed system, but slow to catch on elsewhere. It involves choosing citizens at random to spend up to four days working out a solution to a problem. The key to it is not to overload people, to break the problem down into manageable parts. Some planning cells simply decide what other planning cells should look into.

The B.C. and Ontario citizen's assemblies are among the earliest examples of participatory democracy in Canada. Most of the problems with it are the mistakes of inexperience.

### next time

The big mistake was that it was too large and too long. Next time, it needs to be done in smaller groups which meet locally. All the problems must be broken down into manageable chunks. Each group can send delegates to a larger group.

These groups must be sequestered away from organised lobbying campaigns. The public consultations were of little use. They did not increase public awareness, and they offered the assembly little guidance. Overwhelmingly, the 'public' which showed up were uninformed, hostile to all change, or 'working' for somebody.

There will be a lot of next times, and we will learn from the experiences of this assembly. The members of the assembly performed very well under often frustrating circumstances, and are trail blazers.

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