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## ***Getting Ready for the Referendum: Food for Thought...***

### **Forum Highlights**

**Public Forum on Electoral Systems:  
Policy Influence, Impacts and Implications  
Toronto, Ryerson University, June 18, 2007**

**June 2007**

**Canadian Policy Research Networks Inc. and  
Ryerson University**

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Does the way we elect our politicians have an impact on the transparency of decision making and our ability to hold our representatives accountable? What are the implications of electoral systems for political parties? Can we really achieve a positive culture shift in our political institutions by changing how we elect people or are traditional power brokers too entrenched? This is a sample of the questions about electoral systems that over 100 participants explored with panellists and each other in a wide ranging discussion at the June 18 Public Forum.

Canadian Policy Research Networks and Ryerson University hosted this event in the spirit of stimulating discussion, dialogue and debate on which electoral system would best serve the public good in Ontario now and into the future: – the current Single Member Plurality (SMP) system or the Mixed Member Proportional (MMP) system recommended by the Ontario Citizens' Assembly on Electoral Reform. While not advocating one over the other, the co-hosts saw merit in focussing attention on a relatively under-discussed aspect of electoral systems – how the current SMP system and the proposed MMP system may influence, impact, shape, condition and interact with our public policy processes within government, political parties, the Provincial Parliament and civil society.

**Matthew Mendelsohn**, Ontario Deputy Minister, Intergovernmental Affairs and Democratic Renewal, moderated the forum. His opening remarks focused on why the Ontario government had chosen a neutral, impartial, citizen-driven process – rather than leaving it to politicians – to determine whether Ontarians should be given the choice of changing their electoral system and if so, which system.

**Jonathan Rose**, Academic Director for the Assembly, set the stage by sketching the learning, consultation and deliberation phases followed by the Citizens' Assembly. He also reviewed the 8 principles and values that guided members' thinking and described the key design elements of the MMP proposal they chose. Citizens' Assembly member **Matthew Certosimo** spoke about some challenges the members grappled with in coming to their decision, noting their efforts to balance different values and considerations on major issues, such as the size of the legislature and the ratio between local and party list members. To view their presentation, go to [www.cprn.org/doc.cfm?doc=1738&l=en](http://www.cprn.org/doc.cfm?doc=1738&l=en).

The Panel included:

- **Sean Conway** (Former Ontario MPP, now Associate Director, Institute of Intergovernmental Relation at Queen's University),
- **Andrew Coyne** (National Post Columnist ),
- **Marcel Lauzière** (President, Canadian Council on Social Development),
- **Michael Pal**, (Co-author of "Is Every Ballot Equal? Visible Minority Vote Dilution in Canada" ([www.irpp.org/fasttrak/index.htm](http://www.irpp.org/fasttrak/index.htm)),
- **Judy Rebick** (CAW-Sam Gindin Chair in Social Justice and Democracy, Ryerson University) and
- **Nelson Wiseman** (Professor of Political Science, University of Toronto).

They represented a range of perspectives on the topic, some arguing for the merits of the current SMP, while others supported the proposed MMP. Overall, panellists identified both benefits and challenges of the current and proposed systems in relation to their impacts on and implications for the policy process and decision-making.

The following text summarizes the panellists' and audience's key points (organized thematically). Please note that the ideas presented do not necessarily reflect consensus views nor do they reflect the views of CPRN or Ryerson. This summary is presented in an effort to contribute to furthering public discussion on some important implications of the different electoral systems and to help Ontarians prepare to vote in the October 10, 2007 referendum on MMP or SMP.

### **Implications for Geographic, Demographic and Ideological Diversity**

- The most important constituent unit in our political system is not the party or the riding but the voter, and the bedrock of our political system in Canada is the principle that every individual vote is worth the same. The way in which our current “winner takes all” system has evolved has had the effect of making some votes count more than others. For example, the rural vote is overrepresented while the urban vote is underrepresented in the legislature. This growing rural/urban imbalance raises concerns about democratic legitimacy and about policy decisions that don't necessarily reflect the needs of urban voters in general, and ethnic/cultural communities in particular.
- In PR systems like MMP the addition of party list seats could add more weight to the urban vote. This is particularly important given the changing demographics of Ontario (and all of Canada), where immigration accounts for a growing proportion of the population and the vast majority of new immigrants in Ontario are settling in the Golden Horseshoe and Ottawa.
- International experience with MMP systems shows that party lists are more reflective of demographic and ideological diversity. However, the relatively low number of party list members in the proposed Ontario MMP system (39 versus 90) makes this more challenging, as there are no guarantees that the 90 local members would be more diverse than they are today. Some argued that this calls for further consideration to be given to ensuring greater diversity in the 90 single member ridings.
- MMP systems around the world result in better representation of women than the current SMP system. Under the proposed MMP system, political parties would be under significant pressure to include many more women among their candidates and to justify to the satisfaction of the electorate why they did not. However, others noted that the Citizens' Assembly MMP model is a relatively modest proposal (30/70 split between party list and single members). There was also scepticism about the MMP's ability to spark the required political cultural shift in political parties to achieve adequate representation of women, ethno-cultural communities and Aboriginals.
- It is unrealistic to expect the legislature to reflect an exact breakdown of the demographics of Ontario. Instead, all politicians should reach out and make empathetic connections, regardless of their race or gender. However, the current demographic makeup of our democratic institutions is unacceptable.

- The MMP model enables smaller parties to run candidates, thus widening the ideological spectrum, enlarging policy discussions, and providing greater voter choice.
- While a MMP system results in more diverse voices around the decision making table, it does not guarantee better policy decisions; it is more likely to lead to better policy discussions.
- However regardless of the electoral system, women and racial minorities will continue to have less influence in shaping policy unless they hold the powerful economic Cabinet portfolios.

### **Implications for Political Parties**

- In deciding on a MMP party list model, the Citizens' Assembly discussed how to avoid giving political parties too much power. Their MMP recommendation requires parties to publish their lists and candidate selection process with Elections Ontario well in advance of Election Day. This would allow for transparency and leave it to the voters to judge how well parties reflect the diversity of the population and regional or regional representation.
- The experience in New Zealand with its party vote (list members) shows that parties feel considerable pressure to win votes everywhere, not just in targeted ridings. Voters from across the country use their list vote to indicate their satisfaction or dissatisfaction with parties. This has had a tremendous impact on how parties operate and has improved the ability of voters to hold them accountable.
- While some believe that this will likely be the case in Ontario, others are less sanguine about the behaviour of political parties under MMP. They maintain that with or without MMP, significant party reforms are needed for the necessary culture change to occur, in particular to limit the power of party executives.
- Some think that it would be much more appealing to a politician to be elected as a list member than a constituency member. In this view, the 39 party list members would have more time and perhaps more expertise to focus on policy issues. This was set in contrast to the current system, which some think has resulted in MPPs spending too much of time dealing with direct concerns of their individual constituents (which should be handled by the public service) with too little focus and opportunity to deal with policy issues.
- Others disagreed, noting that many MPPs currently do much more than constituency work and have made their mark in policy leadership, even if not in Cabinet. Another perspective voiced was that the policy role of MPPs has little to do with electoral system per se and needs to be addressed regardless. A connected issue raised was a concern that the list and constituency elected representative would create two classes of elected officials. Others argued that the current culture of political parties and their centralized power structures coupled with an executive controlled legislature also creates two classes of elected representatives: those on the inside with power and those on the outside.

## Implications for Government Stability and the Policy Process

- Some speakers think that policy making under MMP would resemble the US Congressional style with more horse-trading between parties as they negotiate for consensus. This could make for more inclusive, but also slower, policy agenda setting given the need for negotiations among the various coalition interests. Others, arguing that the current system also involves a lot of horse trading, believe that MMP would make policy making more transparent to the public.
- Some identified a potential risk that decisions would be delayed while the parties struggle for consensus. Others also see the potential for the parliamentary system to be held hostage by those who hold the balance of power. A related concern was raised about MMP systems possibility making it easier for minority interests to frustrate the will of the majority.
- With a possibility of more parties being elected to the legislature, some worried about a MMP system leading to vote splintering across many parties, making majority governments less likely. Others worry that the formation and operation of coalition governments will be more challenging. However, others noted that all advanced democracies that use MMP have stable party systems and do not have more frequent elections than Ontario.
- MMP systems are unlikely to produce big, single party majority governments, which was a positive aspect for some and a concern for others. Some felt that MMP would produce more multi-party majorities through coalition governments, which are more stable than current minority governments. Parties and legislatures would have to operate in much more cooperative manner, as opposed to current combative approach. The view was that having party list members could also provide greater expertise for legislative committees which the public service could tap into in developing policy options.
- It will take time and considerable effort for the required culture shift in the Ontario legislature and political parties to move from the current highly competitive approach to a more collaborative approach.
- Coalition governments would likely lead to more centrist positions, with fewer policy lurches and greater stability. A contrary view expressed was that signed agreements would lock the parties into certain positions, but if not respected by the parties to the agreement, could lead to greater instability.
- It was noted that following elections, coalitions are often established behind closed doors, with parties making concessions in their electoral platforms to reach a consensus. This could mean that policy platform debates which occur during electoral campaigns would have less meaning, and be less predictive of policy. Voters, who cast their vote on the basis of a particular platform, could have a sense of betrayal if it gets traded away in coalition negotiations.
- On the other hand, several speakers reminded the audience that we need to remember that parties are not operating in a vacuum. They will always have to stand for re-election at some point and this will act as a check on the horse-trading.
- Some think it would be more difficult for people to hold coalition governments to account for their decisions, as opposed to a single party minority or majority government. Others feel that it is a myth to think that the current system provides for accountability as most decisions are now made behind closed doors.

## **Implications for Political Culture / Executive Control / Citizen Engagement**

- It was recognized that the electoral system is only one leg of our democratic stool. Others are political parties, our system of parliamentary responsible government, and our federal structure.
- There was a strong view expressed that changing the electoral system on its own won't be enough to modernize our democratic institutions and practices. Nor can we predict the behaviour of the various actors in our political system. Some argued that the other changes such as political party reform and reinvigorating the public's interest in political affairs should occur before electoral reform is enacted.
- In the same vein, some noted that electoral system change without significant cultural shift among those who hold the reins of power (the Premier's Office and the Cabinet) is unlikely to lead to significant political reform. Party leaders will continue to hold power, negotiate, strike coalitions and form the Cabinet under a MMP system. These individuals wondered if our centralized power structures in government and political parties will be willing to release some of their control to non-Cabinet elected officials, grass roots party members and citizens simply because we change our voting system. They wonder how political parties will behave under MMP. How will the electorate behave? It is difficult to predict this with any confidence.
- The question was posed about whether changing the electoral system would stimulate other needed changes. Responses were mixed as some see it as a strong catalyst for reform while others are doubtful. Some cautioned that we must better understand the problem we are trying to address, in designing a solution. Otherwise, some solutions can have unforeseen and undesirable consequences (the example given was the automatic voters' list).
- It was pointed out that the New Zealand MMP approach has given more authority to elected members serving on legislative committees (policy formulation), but this could be done in any electoral system including the current one.
- In responding to questions about the impact of electoral systems on citizen engagement, several speakers spoke about the importance of the Citizens' Assembly process itself in offering and modeling a new approach to policy and decision making that empowers citizens. The OCA process involved listening to and understanding different perspectives and reaching agreement on complex public policy issues through learning and deliberation rather than horse-trading pre-determined interests. In addition to the BC and Ontario Citizens' Assemblies, the method has been used in the Netherlands and in California.
- Some felt that there should be more referenda, and even Citizens' Assembly processes to tackle important policy issues across the policy spectrum.

## **Implications for the Relations between Politicians and the Public Service**

- It was argued that coalition governments present more challenges for the public service. As with minority governments under SMP, the public service must understand the positions of all parties, but in coalition governments, they must also carefully consider the agreements between the coalition members, assess possible impacts of public policy options and decisions against each party agenda. In addition, the presence in the Cabinet of ministers from parties outside the party in power can complicate relationships between Ministers, the public service and the government leader.

The evening concluded with a call to the audience to become engaged in the public education process to ensure that Ontarians are well prepared to make informed choices on October 10, 2007.

For more information on the proposed MMP system and the current electoral system (SMP) and on the public education phase for the Referendum, go to Elections Ontario's site [www.electionsontario.on.ca](http://www.electionsontario.on.ca) and the Ontario Citizens' Assembly on Electoral Reform site [www.citizensassembly.gov.on.ca](http://www.citizensassembly.gov.on.ca).

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