



CFUW ONTARIO COUNCIL STANDING COMMITTEES

March 3rd, 2007

THE REFORM OF ONTARIO'S ELECTORAL SYSTEM: SAVIOUR OR THREAT TO DEMOCRACY?

The morning speaker was **Dr. Graham White**, professor of political science at U of T, an expert on Canadian governments, speaking on the potential reform of Ontario's electoral system.

The Ontario Citizens Assembly, a group of randomly-selected volunteers chosen to reflect the Ontario demographic, is meeting to consider alternatives to the present Single Member Plurality (first-past-the-post) electoral system now in place.

If it recommends changes, a referendum must be held at the October 10th election this year. If the referendum passes, the new system must be in place by the 2011 election.

Prof. White outlined the two basic systems, Single Member Plurality (SMP) and some form of Proportional Representation (PR), stressing that neither was right nor wrong, and that each had characteristics that could be either advantages or disadvantages.

SMP involves electing one member in each geographic district.

Characteristics of SMP:

- it is simple;
- can provide stable majority government;
- can minimize significant parties;
- provides a direct link between member and district;
- distorts voter preference;
- over-rewards the most popular parties;
- penalizes small parties;
- winning party may not have a majority of votes,
- over-rewards regional parties (eg Bloc) over national parties (eg NDP, Green) exacerbating regional differences.
- it has been accused of discouraging turn-out and producing wasted votes (ie those cast for losing parties).

Proportional Representation has many variations, but all involve seats being allocated according to the proportion of votes cast for the parties. The system that many favour is Mixed Member Proportionality (MMP) where a voter casts two ballots, one for a riding member, and one from a party list.

Characteristics of MMP:

- it is complex and confusing;

- results in MPs elected from the list likely having no direct connection with the electoral district;
- could cause an increase in the number of parties;
- may result in few if any majority governments;
- reduces the concentration of power in one party;
- can produce government paralysis (Israel, Italy), or long-term stable governments (Sweden, Germany);
- could yield large, unwieldy ridings.
- claims that these systems lead to increased voter turn-out and increased representation by under-represented groups (women, aboriginals, ethnic minorities) have not been proven.

Prof. White gave an overview of the Ontario Citizens Assembly, explaining its make-up and characteristics. It was inspired by and similar to a group which considered electoral reform in B.C. last year. Their report is expected the week following Ontario Council's AGM.