

“You Don’t Know What You Got ‘til It’s Gone:” Discourse, Disconnection, Catharsis,
and the Ontario Citizen’s Assembly on Electoral Reform

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“Don’t ever take down a fence until you know why it was put up.”
- Robert Frost

A fence can be used to define a space, as a barrier, or as a divisional boundary. Some weather many storms, and take their fair share of damage, but remain standing. This depends on the original craftsmanship, and the materials that were used. Occasionally, a fence will need major repairs, and often, it shall receive repairs rather than being pulled from the ground and discarded to the trash fire.

Fences have long memories. A fence may surround a home that sees many families come and go. Families inherit fences. A fence is a silent observer to drama that occurs in the house, and the changing world around it. The world may change, families may come and go, but the fence remains constant because there has been no reason to pull it from the ground.

A fence is chosen to suit the house and property whose boundaries it defines. As times change, occupants of the house may decide that it is time to consider a new fence with a superior design that would better serve the property. Before the trusty, time-tested fence is removed it is important to consider several questions. Why was the fence put up in the first place? What was the original intent of the fence? Why hasn’t it been removed until now? Have we really thought about or appreciated the role of the fence? Will new fence designs serve the boundaries of the house and property in a way exceedingly superior to the prior design as to merit replacement?

On May 15th, 2007 the Citizen’s Assembly on Electoral Reform presented its report to the government of Ontario. The report, the result of eight months of study and work, recommended that Ontario’s electoral system be changed from the First Past the Post system, inherited from the Westminster Parliament of Britain. According to assembly members, the traditional system ought to be replaced by a Mixed Member Proportionality system that they determined was a more proportional, representative, and democratic system than FPTP. Furthermore, the report claimed that MMP was better suited “for the unique needs of Ontario (Ontario’s Citizen’s Assembly on Electoral Reform 2007, 3).”

The Citizen’s Assembly was created as a part of a democratic renewal initiative that has gained steam across Canada over the last five years in many different forms. Former Prime Minister Paul Martin loudly championed reform during his brief tenure. Current Prime Minister Stephen Harper has pursued initiatives to reform the unelected Senate into a democratically elected body that is accountable to citizens. The government of Ontario introduced a Minister Responsible for Democratic Renewal, fixed election dates, and new rules of disclosure of political contributions to political parties and leadership candidates (Robertson and Rowland 2006).

Ontario's electoral reform experiment follows precedents from other provinces. In Prince Edward Island, Progressive Conservative Premier Pat Binns appointed a former Chief Justice of the Supreme Court of PEI as the head of a one-person commission responsible "to examine options for reform of the Island's electoral system (Robertson and Rowland 2006, 9)." This investigation resulted in a plebiscite on November 28th 2005 that asked voters if they wanted to change systems to an MMP configuration. A strong majority of 63% voted to retain the status quo, first past the post system.

British Columbia also investigated alternative electoral systems, but used a Citizen's Assembly rather than a commission. The use of a group of ordinary citizen's was meant to engage the public, but the resulting referendum also failed to pass, albeit by a closer result. The reform initiative ultimately "gained 57% support across British Columbia," and, "the question was approved in 77 out of 79 ridings (Robertson and Rowland 2006, 4)." While this may seem like a close result, some analysts considered the referendum a fiasco. Ian Urquhart wrote that, "The absence of an effective public education campaign has been blamed for the fiasco two years ago in British Columbia, where most citizens went to the polls in a similar referendum (to Ontario) on electoral reform without having a clue what they were voting on (Urquhart 2007, A15)." Joe Murray, of Fair Vote Canada, adds that one reason the referendum in B.C. wasn't successful was because many B.C. voters didn't understand how the proposed STV system would work (Bobier 2007).

The Citizen's Assembly of Ontario's recommendation of an alternative system than the status quo demands the option of electoral system reform be added to the ballot on the first fixed election date, October 10th, 2007 as a referenda question. Ontarians will be asked whether they want to retain the status quo system, or change to the MMP system championed by their fellow citizens in the Citizen's Assembly. In order for the referendum to pass the legislation demands that at least 60 per cent of all voters support the changes, as well as a majority of support in 60 per cent of all electoral districts (Oliveiri 2007)." Many, including New Democrat leader Howard Hampton, believe that the threshold is too high and the process is set up to fail (Olivieri 2007). Others are concerned that the McGuinty government is not allowing the referenda question to be debated in the legislature, and are afraid that it will be shaped in a manner that could influence the results of the plebiscite away from electoral reform. McGuinty has responded by saying that the referenda question will be simple and straight forward, and easy enough for his mother to understand (Puxley 2007). While it remains unclear what the Premier's mother thinks of such a referenda question, it leaves others worried that the reform initiative is doomed to fail like their British Columbian and Prince Edward Islander predecessors.

Ontario's latest step toward electoral reform will be watched closely by advocates of both change and the status quo. Many believe that the referendum will follow the pattern of BC and PEI, and that the status quo will be preserved. This will not be an affront to the dedicated members of the Assembly, those in charge of educating the members, or those in charge of the public education campaign. Regardless of the outcome of the referendum, the Citizen's Assembly fails.¹ The citizen's assembly on electoral reform in Ontario attempts to use a participatory democratic model to engage

¹ Admittedly, the author hopes that it does not pass. This is not due to any inclination toward the status quo or alternative voting systems, but it will strengthen my stance.

and represent the public, or demos, but paradoxically alienates the public, guaranteeing its failure. The alienation results from the creation of separate deliberative spheres with different discursive contexts. The result means that the Citizen's Assembly becomes disconnected from the public they are supposed to represent; they lose their democratic solidarity with citizens and become a separate deliberative sphere. This occurs for several reasons: what I will call "the radicalization of the status quo," different levels of civic educative standards, and the use of the Citizen's Assembly as a form of democratic catharsis that aims to appease the democratic desires of the public sphere. Even if the referendum does pass, this does not save the Citizen's Assembly fate because the standard of knowledge and discussion within the public sphere will still be lower than that of the Citizen's Assembly. The Citizen's Assembly still fails its goal of representing the public, and the result is "the illusion of victory by "the people" over political elites (Laycock 1996, 36)."

The Citizen's Assembly has been championed as an exciting, and unique example of participatory democracy. It attempts to "relinquish some policy power back to popular sovereignty and allow citizens autonomous, unmediated, collective, community-based deliberation regarding the good of the polity (Laycock 36, 2007)." The assembly aims to represent the public sphere, and "exert a critical and legitimating function on the political and economic systems, pushing them into democratic control (Finlayson 2005, 14)." "It returns the powers of policy making, grasped by elites under representative democracy, back to citizens, allowing them to practice their civic responsibility of collective law-making (Laycock 1996, 38)."

Direct Participatory democracy and Representative democracy "have been seen as contending and antithetical models of rule by the people (Laycock 1996, 35)." David Laycock claims that "in our era of centralized political party and decision making, and heavy influence of by wealthy or well organized interests on political decision making, it is tempting to conclude that allowing citizens [to discuss] and vote regularly on particular aspects of public policy will necessarily bring more popular control to public life (Laycock 1996, 35)." The citizen's assembly attempts to mend the bridge between direct, participatory models of democracy, and representative models. Unfortunately, it does not succeed.

Toronto Star columnist Ian Urquhart, a regular at Queen's Park, and a participant on electoral reform debates organized by the Assembly and The Churchill Society for the Advancement of Parliamentary Democracy, believed that the First Past the Post system had no chance of survival in the deliberations of the Assembly. He wrote, "Given that assembly members have stated they want to "make history" and that they have been immersed in the arcana of electoral reform for the past seven months, there is no chance they will opt for the status quo. Indeed, it would be surprising if the status quo were supported by more than one or two assembly members in the final vote (Urquhart 2007)." In the final vote tally, Mixed Member Plurality received 75 votes, Single Transferable Vote received 25 votes, with the remainder going to Single Member Plurality.² Jeffrey Simpson adds,

"When this assembly began, it was obvious the existing electoral system would take a beating. After all, gathering

² One member absent due to illness

104 people together, asking that they spend many months in each other's company, meant, almost by definition, that they would recommend change. How else could they justify to themselves, if not to others, all that time and effort? The status quo, therefore, didn't stand a chance. The only issue was which new system the assembly would recommend for Ontario (Simpson 2007, A21)."

A vote in favour of MMP, and little support for the current system should come as little surprise to most observers. It is difficult to make history if the result is no change. There is an understandable desire to leave one's mark. Statements from assembly members generally express this sentiment. "The Citizens' Assembly is a great opportunity to be involved in something that will affect us all," stated Margaret Messenger, Assembly member." Mrs. Messenger's statement can only remain correct if the assembly's verdict "affects us all." This does not bode well for the status quo. Fellow assembly member Raj Roopansingh added, "I want to be involved in a historic process that may recommend change." Realistically, the Citizen's Assembly will be no more than a historical footnote unless it recommends change, and results in a successful referendum that ushers in a new electoral system for Ontario. Another member, Leana Swanson wanted to participate in the Citizens' Assembly because she "felt it was important to be part of something that would have so much impact... that would be groundbreaking." The gravity, and potential impact, of the assembly was driven home by Professor Bill Cross who stated, "'Unlike the rest of the experts, I'm an Ontarian. What you do will affect me, my family, and my community (Canada News Wire 2006).'" Finally, on the first weekend meeting of the assembly, members were presented with this quotation from Margaret Mead: "Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world; indeed, it is the only thing that ever has."

The Citizen's Assembly, and the nature of the selection process, create fertile grounds for change. The member's are frequently reminded how important, and historically significant the unique, once in a lifetime opportunity to affect change is to the future of Ontario. This leads to what I call "the radicalization of the status quo." The starting point of the discourse is no longer, "Why are we changing the current electoral system?" Point A, the status quo, becomes "Why should we not change the electoral system?" The status quo is radicalized from its natural spot within the deliberation. The discussions become a search for a replacement for the natural status quo. The new status quo is change. This changes how all future deliberation, learning, and action are framed and performed within the confines of assembly. The Assembly becomes structured to make the best argument for change instead of against the change. The statement "We are making history" can not coexist with the question "Why are we changing?"

The resulting sensibility of change is not shared with public. The public sphere is not engaged in discourse about the necessity of electoral system change. Jeffery Simpson writes, "In Ontario, not one citizen in thousand – no, ten thousand, maybe a hundred thousand, quite possibly, a million – had ever thought about electoral reform, outside university seminars for students of political science (Simpson 2007, A21)." Therefore, the public feels detached from the process of the assembly. The assembly loses the

democratic solidarity of the demos it supposedly represents. The public becomes alienated from the result of the assembly's deliberations because it no longer represents the discussion they are having. The public are still asking, "Why are we changing?" This result threatens to leave the Citizen's Assembly's recommendation as a systemic directive that poses as a communicative norm resulting from democratic discourse.

Discourse, in this sense, is taken to mean the common practice of argument and justification that is woven into the fabric of everyday life (Finlayson 2005, 41). Discourse always aims to reach a rationally motivated consensus, even if it is known that no consensus shall be attained (Finlayson 2005, 41). A communicative norm is the resulting norm or result of democratic discourse. A norm can only be considered valid "if and only if the foreseeable consequences of its general observances for the interests and value-orientations of each individual could be freely, and jointly accepted by all affected (Habermas 1998, 42)." That is, is the communicative norm that results from the discourse is universalizable? Can it be accepted by those affected by it through rational discourse?

To apply these concepts to the citizen's assembly, the communicative norm that resulted from the rational discourse of the assembly's deliberative sphere is only valid if it can be universalized and accepted following rational motivated consensus from the public sphere. The radicalization of the status quo, and my next point, a staggering difference in civic educative standards, creates a situation where the communicative norm that resulted from the assembly cannot be injected into the public sphere discourse. Therefore, the communicative norm cannot be universalized, and could be rejected by the public sphere. An ideal situation would have both the assembly's discourse and the public sphere discourse commencing from the same status quo, with the same educative standards, that would result in a communicative norm that could be universalized in both spheres using rationally motivated, consensus-seeking, discourse.

Different Levels of Civic Education

The members of the Citizen's Assembly were by all accounts enthusiastic and passionate democrats. They had a thirst for knowledge and became truly engaged in the discussion of alternative electoral systems. The Chair of the assembly, George Thompson, summarized the members' dedication:

The Assembly members constantly amazed me with their enthusiasm and deep commitment to the task they were given. Throughout the eight-month process, not one member withdrew from the Assembly. Members applied themselves to learning about electoral systems. They talked to people in their communities about the work of the Assembly and chaired public consultation meetings. Some members read hundreds of written submissions. Others participated on working groups to advise on the Assembly process or to do more research in specific areas. Many used an online forum to share information and discuss issues

between meetings (Ontario's Citizen's Assembly on Electoral Reform 2007, 24).

The assembly members experienced an intensive and extensive learning program. They participated in in-depth analysis and discussion of texts and presentations on electoral systems. The purpose of such a high educative standard was the hope that a learned, reasoned, and educated Assembly could legitimately recommend electoral system change. Parse that, it was believed that an unlearned group of citizens could not recommend change that would be accepted as legitimate. The thought was that only educated citizens with a strong understanding of the nuances and peculiarities of different systems, and the ability to analytically compare and contrast the strengths and flaws of FPTP, MMP, STV, et al, could call for change.

The learning phase of the assembly was made up of six weekends in the fall of 2006. To fully digest the intensity of the learning sessions, and the volume of material covered it is necessary to look at all six sessions. The information in the following section was garnered from the Citizen's Assembly's very informative and helpful website.

The first weekend consisted of welcoming the members, outlining the learning procedure, and creating a contract between facilitators and members that would construct an ideal vehicle for learning, consultation, and deliberation. The second day of the first weekend included an introduction to the concepts of direct democracy, representative democracy, and electoral systems. This was done on a very basic level and "assumed (that the assembly members had) little or no knowledge of electoral systems (Rose 2006)." It is disconcerting that members would have little or no knowledge of our current electoral system considering that all members were adults, fifty-seven per cent were over forty years of age, and twelve per cent were over seventy. Also, it should be noted that these members were randomly selected from a group of people that were interested in participating in such a group. It was not a compulsory civic duty such as jury duty. It could be assumed that most citizens would not share this interest in learning about electoral reform.

The second weekend featured a plenary session by Dr. Jonathan Rose, Academic Director of the Citizen's Assembly. This session provided Assembly members with an understanding of how government works within our legislature, the role of cabinet, representative government, and majority and minority governments. Dr. Rose's lectures also covered legislative committee systems, the roles of officers of the legislature, and explained the roles of government, cabinet, and the opposition. They also analysed the factors that shape legislative debate and discussion such as party discipline, cabinet solidarity, and how the media affects the public conversation and government. Furthermore, the Assembly members were exposed to different theories of representation, and discussed the roles of representatives in the legislature.

The second weekend was quite intense in comparison to the ice-breaking first session. Further plenary sessions covered how parties function in various electoral systems, how they produce candidates, and the relationship between the number and type of parties and values. Dr. Rose also spoke about single and multi-party governments, and the role of parties as primary vehicles for aggregating interests in democracies. Following this session members had the opportunity to enter a question and answer

session with former parliamentarians Floyd Laughren (NDP), Dianne Cunningham (PC) and Joan Fawcett (Lib).

The final act on Day Two of the second session was to discuss the criteria by which an electoral system's merit should be judged. The guiding principles were created by the Select Committee on Electoral reform. This committee included Liberal, Progressive Conservative, and New Democratic Members of Provincial Parliament. The guiding principles were: Legitimacy, fairness of representation, voter choice, effective parties, stable and effective government, effective parliament, stronger voter participation, and accountability. The assembly members deemed it necessary to include a ninth provision: Simplicity and practicality. It was hoped that the combination of these guiding principles, and a high standard of civic education provided by the academic team, would leave the assembly member's with the skills necessary to legitimately recommend electoral reform, or to adequately defend the current FPTP system. They entered the third weekend with a greater understanding of the foundations of parliamentary representative democracy in Ontario, and were newly armed with nine guiding principles within which they could frame their future discourse.

The third weekend saw the Assembly members begin to analyse the structure of electoral systems. Assembly members received an overview and description of four families: Plurality, Majority, Proportional and Mixed. An introductory discussion of Ontario's First Past the Post was provided by Dr. Rose, and in a detailed discussion of Majority systems, Assembly members learned about ballot structure, differences in voter behaviour and related principles. The weekend ended with panel presentations by, and discussions with, Panellists Dr. David Docherty (Wilfrid Laurier University), Dr. Jennifer Smith (Dalhousie University) and Dr. Larry Leduc (University of Toronto).

The fourth weekend saw an introduction to the Proportional family of electoral systems and the variants within it. The discussion included a look at ballot structure, district magnitude and the formulae used to determine winners. This weekend also saw an analysis of Single Transferable Vote, the choice of the assembly's British Columbian forefather, and a popular choice amongst approximately a quarter of the assembly members. Members learned about the concept of ordinal voting, and how STV combines preference voting, proportionality, and local representation. The fourth weekend also saw a discussion of Mixed Systems, and their variants, that combine proportionality with local representation.

The fifth weekend was composed of eight plenary sessions that discussed Ontario's Citizen's Assembly experiment within the context of previous, and current, electoral reform initiatives. This was a crucial practice in comparative politics, and one of the most important, and intense weekends. Assembly members heard how their process was unique, but similar to, and influenced by, other similar processes. One plenary session was led by guest speakers Prof. Bill Cross and Prof. Louis Massicotte³ and gave Assembly members insight into electoral reform processes in New Brunswick, Quebec and Prince Edward Island. Another plenary session looked in to B.C. experience and the current process in the Netherlands. This session was led by Prof. Ken Carty, a renowned Canadian political scientist, who served as Director of Research for the B.C. Citizen's Assembly on Electoral Reform. The next session explored the case of New Zealand, the shining star of MMP electoral systems. Elizabeth McLeay offered an

³ Prof. Massicotte is currently working on a book about MMP electoral systems.

examination of the electoral reform process in New Zealand, and a discussion of what changed (and didn't change) as a result of the move from Single Member Plurality to a Mixed Member Proportional system. Additional sessions described electoral systems in established and emerging democracies, taking note of the principles they used to choose each system. This focus on principles led to the final act of the weekend; ranking the guiding principles in order of preference. This exercise helped to clarify to members what system best suits their guiding principle preference.

The sixth weekend saw the Assembly put their newly acquired knowledge of electoral systems into action via election simulations. These simulations were combined with refresher discussions on the various electoral systems that would be recreated, and were followed by in-depth discussion and analysis of the results. Dr. Rose then analyzed the results with the assembly members and discussed design variables that were not found in the simulation results.

Over the sixth weekend, Assembly members also heard presentations from four working groups: Political Parties, Women and Other Underrepresented groups, Geographic Representation, and Stable and Effective Government. The simulations and discussions exposed members to the radical change an electoral system overhaul would have on electoral politics and political representation in Ontario if they were to recommend a change from the status quo. The simulations had the potential to create a ravenous thirst for change, or fear of a drastically different politics in Ontario. It appears the former acts as a more apt descriptor of the result.

The last section illustrated how the demanding learning phase gave Assembly members a strong theoretical and practical foundation on electoral systems that would allow them to make a legitimate and respectable recommendation for change. It was feared that if the Assembly members were not viewed as meeting at least a minimum requirement of electoral system understanding their vote for change would not be considered justifiable. Now that the power of electoral reform has been handed back to the electorate, or the public sphere, what level of knowledge will be considered legitimate? What level of education on electoral systems do most citizens have after completing secondary school in Ontario? How can the citizen's assembly be considered representative of the public sphere if it has a level of civic education that leads to a discussion that citizens do not hold the tools to have themselves?

When most Canadian students graduate secondary school they have received thirteen or more years of schooling, and hold basic skills in a wide field of areas. The mathematics skills developed and nurtured every year become instinctual and reactionary for many students. Math becomes immersed in one's being in a way that it becomes impossible to be encountered with '1+1' without thinking '2.' Math is considered a crucial element of any curriculum because it allows students to function within society, and better understand and contribute to the economy. These basic mathematics skills are retained because those skills are regularly used in personal finances at the most basic level. Everyone needs to know how to count and manage their money. People cherish mathematical and economic skills because such skills allow them to survive in, contribute to, or thrive in a capital driven society. It is important to note, that we send our young people in the working world after secondary school with the skills necessary to contribute to our economy. What is often lost is that most high school students graduate at approximately eighteen years of age; the year of legal adulthood and voting age in

Canada. Do we prepare our young people as citizens just as we prepare them as consumers and contributors to the economy?

The reader ought to be reminded that the introductory plenary session of the Citizen's Assembly assumed little to no knowledge of electoral systems even though many of the members had been voting for decades. It is difficult to imagine a similar scenario where members would be taught basic addition, subtraction, and multiplication after decades of experience using systems that are dependant on a basic level of mathematical skill. Still, it remains that the educators of the Assembly assumed that those functioning within our electoral system had little to no knowledge of how our current, or any, electoral system works. The creation of economic citizens takes precedence over the creation of competent democratic citizens.

In Ontario, the Ministry of Education is responsible for developing curriculum policy, but the implementation of policy is the responsibility of school boards. Under the direction of their board and school, teachers plan units of study, develop a variety of teaching approaches, and select appropriate resources to address the curriculum expectations, taking into account the needs and abilities of the students in their classes. Most discussions of politics are held under the realm of Canadian history. In elementary school, students cover the Electoral system in Grade 5, where they are expected to:

- "describe the structure and components of Canada's federal, provincial/territorial, and municipal governments";
- describe "the rights of groups and individuals and the responsibilities of citizenship in Canada, including participation in the electoral process and the granting of voting rights to various groups (e.g., women, First Nation peoples);
- "explain the processes of electing governments in Canada"

After this strong introduction to civic education, the focus mainly turns to Canadian history. By the time a compulsory half credit Civics course is taken in Grade 10, it is fair to assume that most of the knowledge from Grade 5 has been lost. This is the end of compulsory civics education in Ontario schools. Students do have the choice in Grade 11 and 12 to pick a 'Politics' course under the broader name area of "Canadian and World Studies," but it is optional, and not all schools are able to provide such courses. If a student does choose these courses, he/she will learn to describe how well the Canadian electoral process succeeds in choosing representative and popularly supported leaders at all levels of government. It can be clearly observed that civic education is a component of the curriculum that is given less credence than other areas. It is also important to note that the term "electoral system" cannot be found in the Grade 11 and 12 Social Sciences and humanities curriculum.

The result is a public that has a low level of civic education and competency. There is a democratic duty to civic competence that is not being met. Aristotle stated that citizens must have the ability to rule and be ruled (Aristotle, Ostwald trans, 1962). The following poll is troubling in that regard. In 2002, Ipsos Reid conducted a poll on behalf of the Dominion Institute that asked Canadians a three question quiz about former Prime Ministers. The questions asked who was Canada's first Prime Minister, what Prime Minister invoked the War Measures Act, and who was Canada's first francophone Prime Minister. The results were alarming, and demonstrated that Canadians "lack basic

knowledge about their Prime Ministers (Ipsos Reid 2002).” Six in ten (60%) Canadians failed the quiz, including 34% who did not answer any of the questions correctly. Older Canadians (56%) were more likely to pass than middle aged (39%) or younger (28%) Canadians. It is disheartening to see young people perform so poorly considering they recently completed their time in the education system. The blame for this poor performance should not be shouldered by citizens, but on a systemic failure to educate them and engage them in politics. If Canadians know so little about basic Canadian politics, how can we expect a reasonable debate about electoral reform? .

What is the result? The result is one group, the Citizen’s Assembly on Electoral Reform, which has a vast knowledge of electoral system including nuances, exceptions to the rule, and simulation results. This came from intensive learning sessions, question and answer periods with experts and politicians, and complex, realistic simulations that allowed member’s to see theory in practice. The other group, the public sphere, has a low level of civic education and knowledge, and is assumed to have little to no basic knowledge on electoral systems. The resulting manifestation is a situation where the public sphere is incapable of having the same level of discussion as the Citizen’s Assembly. This creates a disconnect between the public sphere and the Assembly that is supposed to represent them. The Assembly can no longer be deemed representative because their increased knowledge changes the level of discourse and the discursive context to a point where it no longer mirrors any potential discussion by the public sphere. The citizen’s assembly loses whatever democratic solidarity it had with citizens. Citizens no longer see themselves represented in the assembly. The Assembly becomes participatory only for those participating within it.

Secondly, it seems counterintuitive to hold one group to a remarkably high standard of civic knowledge on electoral systems in order to recognize their vote for change as legitimate, and then hand it over to a second group that does not meet a similar knowledge threshold. Yes, there will be a public education campaign, and ideally this campaign will successfully engage and educate citizens, but there are several concerns. Will citizens be interested? Jeffrey Simpson promotes a summer BBQ test. At a summer BBQ, ask a fellow patron about MMP, FPTP and check if their response is a discussion of electoral reform or a request for ketchup or napkins (Simpson 2007, A21).

Will citizens take the time to learn enough about electoral systems to make an educated decision on referendum day? How fair will the public education campaign be? What kinds of advertising will be allowed by government and third parties? What considerations of fair advertising and persuasion will be considered? Millions of Ontarians will participate in the referendum, and many will cast their votes for an electoral system they don’t understand very well, and certainly do not understand to the level of the assembly members. As Nancy Rosenblum reminds us, “civic consciousness and political engagement are the not the same as competence (Rosenblum 1995, 4).”

Many citizens will wonder where this desire to remove the trusty old fence came from, but will also not have enough knowledge about fence designs to contribute to the discussion about what fence best suits the needs of the house. Competence was attained by the Assembly through the intensive civic education campaign led by the Assembly’s hardworking academic staff. It is hard to imagine a public education campaign that could come anywhere near this level; that is, if anyone is even paying attention. Either way, the Citizen’s Assembly on Electoral Reform becomes transformed into a model of

participatory direct democracy only for the participants involved in it, and can no longer claim to be a representative embodiment of the Ontarian electorate.

The Citizen's Assembly as Democratic Catharsis

The final point of contention to be raised in this examination of the Citizen's Assembly is a commentary on politician's, and the media's, attitudes towards the electoral reform initiative. This section will forward the claim that participatory democratic experiments such as the Assembly are necessary to quench the thirst of citizen's democratic desires, and the psychological need to feel as though one is the master of one's own affairs. Citizens desire to feel "that they are to be ruled by the logic of the operation of the political situation that they had themselves created (Pateman 1970, 23)."

Participatory models of direct democracy are used sparingly in modern representative democracies because of a "preoccupation with the stability of the political system (Pateman 1970, 1)." Occasionally they are deemed necessary by political elites because citizens feel disconnected and removed from policy creation and the resulting laws that govern them. Therefore, political masters appease the masses, often against their own governing interest, by creating participatory opportunities for every day citizens. A cynic might claim that these participatory opportunities are controlled from step one by rulers; that a systemic directive poses as a communicative norm. A cynic might also claim that the Citizen's Assembly is designed to fail by its political masters. This analysis will attempt to avoid such conspiratorial claims, but will acknowledge that there is little support for reform amongst the governing party, and that the referendum threshold will make it difficult for reform to occur. Therefore, democratic desires are satiated, citizens experience catharsis, but nothing changes.

Paul Bobier writes, "Before the referendum is held, however, the voters of Ontario need to deal with and overcome the McGuinty government's super-majority approval thresholds and inadequately funded education program. They will have to make a strenuous effort to become fully informed about the recommended alternative to FPTP, and then to mobilize the support of the required 60% of voters (Bobier 2007, 21)." The threshold of sixty per cent of the popular vote and a majority vote in sixty per cent of the ridings is criticized by some, including NDP leader Howard Hampton, as being too high. Others are concerned that the referendum question is being drafted in secret. NDP Democratic Renewal critic Michael Prue stated, "Look at some of the referenda that have been held. You get a biased question that twigs the people to vote a certain way. It should be debated in the legislature (Puxley 2007)."

Others are concerned by the little support electoral reform has received from the governing Liberal Party and the opposition Progressive Conservatives. PC leader John Tory claimed, "In all my travels around the province ... I have not met one person ... (who said) the answer is to have more politicians at Queen's Park (Greenberg 2007)." Prominent Liberal Finance Minister Greg Sorbara added, "'I think that improving life in Ontario isn't really going to be furthered very much by having a different electoral system (Greenberg 2007)." Globe and Mail Queen's Park journalist Murray Campbell observes that "while it's an open secret that the mixed-member proportional system recommended

by the citizens' group has hardly any supporters in the Liberal caucus, backbenchers and cabinet ministers alike run away when a reporter, with a recorder in hand, asks an opinion. The government simply can't back away in silence after initiating something that could alter the political system -- and in my humble opinion -- risk whatever cohesion modern, multicultural Ontario possesses (Campbell 2007).''Finally, Ian Urquhart adds, ''(the rejection of the Assembly's recommendation by the electorate) might suit current members of the Legislature just fine, for while they set up the citizens' assembly, most of them favour the status quo (Urquhart 2007).''

It does not bode well for proponents of MMP if both major parties campaign against the reform in October. While this might be unlikely, especially by the Liberals, there will still be channels used so that it is clearly known that they stand against electoral reform even if the official party line is electoral system neutrality. This will also impact the legitimacy of the public education campaign, which will be partially financed by government. While it may be too strong to claim that the electoral reform initiative was designed to fail, it is fair to say that many in positions of power in Ontario strongly, and not so secretly, long for the initiative to fail. Why would they commission an experiment they desire to fail? Democratic catharsis perhaps, but also, once the people have spoken against electoral reform it will be difficult to begin new reform initiatives. The work of the Citizen's Assembly, and the resulting referendum, could become tools for those opposed to electoral system reform.

Conclusion

Many exciting events will occur in the months leading up to the referendum of October 10th, 2007. Many more questions need to be answered regarding electoral reform, and the Citizen's Assembly. This draft paper has attempted to pose and answer some early questions that rise from the final report released May 15th, 2007. This analysis has claimed that the Citizen's Assembly, while well intentioned, is destined not to succeed regardless of the referendum result. The cause of this failure is a disconnection from the public sphere that causes the Citizen's Assembly to lose its representative nature. This is caused by the radicalization of the status quo, a schism in civic education standards, and democratic catharsis. The failure of the Citizen's Assembly ought not to be blamed on the participants, organizers, and experts that diligently gave their time to promote democracy in Ontario. They should be strongly commended for their dedication. The fault lies in a systemic, nation wide, failure to properly educate citizens properly to ensure competent, democratic citizens.

With higher standards of civic education, citizens would be better informed, and further engaged in politics. Citizens would meet Rosenblum's standards of consciousness, engagement, and competence. They would hold the tools to take the recommendation of the Citizen's Assembly and consider it through rationally motivated, consensus driven, deliberation. The level of disconnection and alienation from the Citizen's Assembly, and their representatives in the Legislative Assembly, would be drastically reduced. The communicative norm resulting from the Citizen's Assembly would have a greater chance of being universalized. Furthermore, a more informed, and competent citizenry would be more involved in the policy process and would be better able to hold the government accountable, therefore, citizen's psychological democratic

urges would be regularly, and properly, satiated and there would no longer be the need for occasional democratic catharsis orchestrated by political elites.

While a systemic overhaul that creates greater standards of civic education is admittedly easier said than done, it is a challenge that we should not shrink away from. It is the duty of democrats to strengthen our democracy, for we are its lifeblood. An ideal situation would have both the Assembly's discourse and the public sphere discourse commencing from the same status quo, with the same educative standards, that would result in a communicative norm that could be universalized in both spheres using rationally motivated, consensus-seeking, discourse. The Citizen's Assembly is a long stride in the right direction. Now, we must create the fertile soils in which the next attempt will flourish.

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