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An Electoral Reform Primer
by Robert Welch

We're into a provincial election campaign, with the votes to be counted on October 10th. However, with less public emphasis, but perhaps greater long-term public importance, is a companion referendum campaign going on at the same time. Voters will also be asked to indicate whether they support a proposal to fundamentally change the way we elect members to the Ontario Legislature. As of now, we elect 107 members in 107 constituencies in a "first past the post" system. The party with the most seats, in almost all cases, then forms a government.

In recent years, some observers have felt that anomalies have occurred in the results. In 1990, Bob Rae and the New Democrats won 57 percent of the seats with 37 percent of the popular vote. In 1995, Mike Harris's Progressive Conservatives won 63 percent of the seats with 45 percent of the vote. In 2003, Dalton McGuinty and the Liberals won 70 percent of the seats with 46 percent of the vote. The argument goes that, in these scenarios, minor parties have been under-represented in the seat count based upon their popular vote.

In the 2003 election, McGuinty promised to have Ontarians consider another form of election to our legislature. Last fall, a citizens' assembly under the leadership of Judge George Thomson as chair, started a process to consider other options. 104 individuals (one per constituency) rejected the status quo and this spring concluded their deliberations by recommending a mixed member proportional system.

Under this proposal, the number of directly-elected members would be reduced from 107 to 90 (90 new constituencies). 39 additional seats would be allocated in an expanded legislative assembly based on percentage of voting for each party. The proposal is a hybrid between pure proportional representation and the familiar first past the post method. The recognized parties would establish their lists, and presumably if, say, the Green Party received 10 percent of the popular vote, it would be allocated 4 of those 39 seats, in addition to those it might have won in the directly-elected format

In order for the system to be in place by the next election, it will have to receive 60 percent support in 60 percent of the Ontario constituencies in this election, and the total "yes" vote will have to be at least 50 percent.

Now why is this a relevant topic in a Business Bulletin? The way we are governed is extremely important to business and industry. Legislature pass laws, and governments promulgate regulations, that have direct impact on the life of business. This proposed change in the way we elect our provincial legislature, which is how we base who governs us in this province, deserves our attention and scrutiny.

The foregoing is provided to you for information purposes only. We caution you to obtain legal advice specific to your situation in all circumstances.

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