Deliberation at work

An excerpt of the *Prince Edward County Citizens' Assembly Final Report*
for the Prince Edward County Council Committee of the Whole. September 19, 2013

Prince Edward County
Citizens' Assembly

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Executive Summary

For years the size of Prince Edward County's Council has been a matter of contention. In April 2013, Council decided to establish a citizens' panel to answer a question that had been so elusive: what is the appropriate size-of-council in Prince Edward County? Thus, the Prince Edward County Citizens' Assembly was born.

Selected at random using a civic lottery system, twenty-three residents of the County met on three Saturdays in July and August 2013. They heard from former County employees, local councillors, consulted friends and neighbours, deliberated together, and, finally, made a principles-based recommendation to Council.

By consensus, the Assembly recommended that Council should be made up of ten councillors plus one mayor. They further decided that these councillors should be distributed across a number of wards created in accordance with a list of primary values developed over the course of the Assembly's meetings.

This report summarizes the recommendations, the reasoning behind those recommendations and provides an account of how those decisions were made.

The Citizens' Assembly was led by Dr. Jonathan Rose, an associate professor in the Department of Political Studies at Queen's University.

What is a Citizens' Assembly?

A citizens' assembly model places citizens at the heart of public decision-making. It involves a group selected at random to deliberate on matters of public importance. Assembly members, who are broadly representative of the population, are given an in-depth curriculum that includes insider perspectives, small group discussions and plenary debates. The Assembly is created through a civic lottery whereby randomly selected citizens are invited to opt into a pool of potential participants. From this list, individuals are randomly selected until a representative balance of key demographic attributes such as gender, age, and geography is achieved.

The Citizens' Assembly model is designed to draw upon the capacities of non experts to make informed decisions in the public interest. In the past, this model has been used by national and provincial governments to resolve contentious issues in a democratic and transparent manner. At its core, a Citizens' Assembly is about consensus-

building and finding shared interests. It is not a replacement for elected democracy but is a tool used to enhance it.

Convening a Citizens' Assembly is a new process that has been tried in a few places across Canada to resolve challenging and divisive public issues. What distinguishes the Citizens' Assembly from other forms of public consultation is the faith it places in the abilities of the typical citizen. Through a specially crafted and rigorous curriculum, presentations and roundtable discussions, this process turned randomly selected citizens into citizen-experts capable of making informed and well-reasoned policy decisions. This approach is much deeper than typical surveying methods or poorly attended public meetings. Citizens' Assembly members are asked to learn about a particular issue, deliberate with their fellow citizens and come to a consensus on a policy issue.

Prince Edward County Citizens' Assembly By the Numbers

0   Number of times a Citizens' Assembly had previously been used by a municipality to address the size-of-council issue in Canada

5000   Number of Letters sent to residents of the County in May 2013

365   Responses by phone or by mail, a 7.3 percent return rate

6   Upon hearing they'd been selected, the number of times members said "I feel like I won the lottery!"

70   Percentage of Assembly members who have lived in the County for more than ten years

26   Percentage of Assembly members who have lived in the County for 5 to 9 years

96   Percentage of Assembly members who are year-long residents of the County

576   Total volunteer hours given by members of the Citizens' Assembly

95.7   Percentage of Assembly members who agreed or strongly agreed with the statement, "I would participate in another Citizens' Assembly again"

95.7   Percentage of Assembly members who agreed or strongly agreed with the statement, "I learned a lot during this process"

100+   Number of slides presented over three weekends

24   Number of hours spent by each Citizens' Assembly member deliberating, discussing and learning

3   Total absences over three sessions (96 percent attendance)

0   Easy answers

The Prince Edward County Citizens' Assembly recommendations

The following is the recommendation of the Prince Edward County Citizens' Assembly to Council:

" ***We, the Prince Edward County Citizens' Assembly, recommend that the appropriate size-of-council be ten councillors (plus one mayor) and that those councillors be distributed across a number of wards created in accordance with the values we have articulated.***

About size-of-council

81% of Assembly members want Council to be comprised of ten councillors and one mayor

An even number of councillors plus a mayor is necessary to arrive at decisive voting majorities on Council.

Currently, a tie vote is automatically defeated and and such an outcome is possible because Council is comprised of an even number (15 plus a mayor). An even number of councillors plus mayor would prevent this from occurring.

There was no desire among the members of the Citizens' Assembly to increase the size-of-council.

About ward configuration

The Assembly's recommendation of a Council of 10 plus a mayor points to a ward configuration that consists of one, two, five or ten wards of roughly equal population.

While ward configuration was beyond the scope of the Assembly's mandate, there are some implications for ward structure that can be drawn from the deliberations and that suggest a system of either two or five wards of roughly equal population.

The relevant considerations were as follows:

There was no appetite for an at-large system (i.e., one ward) because it would cause many small communities to lose their voice on Council. Moreover, campaigning in a single, at-large ward could impose prohibitive costs on potential candidates. High costs could keep talented people from running for office.

Representation by population must be satisfied. This is the principle that each vote should be roughly equal in its influence on elections. When wards differ significantly in population, the value of each vote counts more in some places than in others. The implication of representation by population alongside the ten-councillor recommendation is that the current ten-ward structure is not viable and needs to be reconfigured. In its present form, wards have varying populations, which creates voter inequality.

In order to satisfy the members' principles of greater good, effectiveness and forward thinking, there needs to be fewer wards than the current ten.

The greater good value is satisfied by the fewest number of wards. But this must be balanced against the needs of smaller communities and regional populations. Ten is too many; one is too few.

Balance and fairness suggests that, where possible, wards should include urban and rural mix.

Finally, any redistricting must be accompanied by meaningful consultation with citizens of Prince Edward County.

While re-districting was beyond their scope, the Assembly was clear that their values provide clear guidance as to how their recommendation could be implemented. An elaboration of this is found in *An Account of the Citizens' Assembly proceedings,* Day three.

About the values

The values articulated by the Citizens' Assembly are the product of many hours of deliberation and form the core reasons for their recommendation. They should be taken into consideration when Council makes its decisions on the recommendations expressed in this report. For people who did not watch the proceedings, the number ten may at first seem rather arbitrary. However, Assembly members spent a lot of time thinking about their values and how they inform their size-of-Council decision. This table explains how the values-based reasoning translated into the specific recommendation that emerged in the final meeting.

Why do these values mean ten councillors?

Value	What it means	Why it means ten Councillors
Balance and Fairness	The needs of the County should take precedence over needs of each ward. There should be a balance between: the needs of business and labour; permanent and non-permanent residents; urban and rural; north and south. All wards should have urban and rural elements wherever possible.	A ten councillor system is large enough to ensure that there is a low councillor-to-resident ratio and provides for representation of smaller communities on Council. Under a six or eight councillor system, the needs of smaller communities may become lost in the workload of few councillors. Twelve or fourteen councillors would begin to strain the principle of effectiveness. The matter of redistricting to have wards encompass urban and rural elements is a technical matter that the Assembly cannot reasonably pursue.
Effectiveness	Effectiveness is understood as Council governing and not managing. Elected officials are elected to govern and decide, not to administer and execute. An effective Council should not have tie votes. The tie-breaker mechanism should not create a higher threshold for passage of motions.	A smaller Council is necessary in order to achieve the goal of governing. If Council focuses on governing, councillors will be less inclined to manage the implementation of policy, leaving that for County staff. Fewer councillors representing a greater number of residents is ideal. However, the number of councillors cannot be brought down too low without compromising the low councillor-to-resident ratio. Based on population projections, ten councillors would maintain a desirable resident-to-councillor ratio. To rectify the tie-breaker mechanism, an even number of councillors is necessary so that alongside the mayor (elected at-large), an effective Council would be comprised of an odd number.
Forward Thinking	Forward thinking as a value suggests that the size-of-council ought to be adaptable to changes in County population patterns	The Assembly felt that reducing the size-of-council was desirable, but that their recommendation needed to anticipate future growth. This value reinforces the historically low councillor-to-resident ratio that is so valuable in Prince Edward County. The County population is expected to grow by 2,000 over the next two decades and a Council of ten (plus the mayor) is a reasonable balance between effectiveness and adaptability.

Value	What it means	Why it means ten Councillors
Greater Good	The needs of the entire County come first wherever possible. Collective good of the County as a whole should take precedence over individual or regional good.	The current number of councillors and the current ward configuration make it too easy for decision making to become captured by parochial interests. At the same time, it is important not to completely eliminate individual interests. A ten councillor system balances representation of interests with a broader vision of Prince Edward County. Combined with a well-crafted ward configuration, ten councillors could satisfy the greater good much better than the current system.
Openness	Accessibility, engagement and responsiveness are core features of a good Council. Councillors are conduits for these three virtues. Free flow of information places emphasis on governance over management.	For a small community, having easy access to councillors is an important virtue. Therefore, maintaining a low councillor-to-resident ratio is important in Prince Edward County. A ten-councillor system will still retain one of the lowest ratios among similarly sized municipalities in Ontario in the coming decades (see Table 1, page 15). Ten councillors is a reasonable compromise between the larger Council sizes, and the other values articulated by the Assembly.
Representation by Population	Following good democratic practices, each councillor should represent approximately the same number of constituents.	This is a legal requirement that will have to be satisfied regardless of the size-of-council. See *Electoral Boundary Readjustment Act (RSC, 1985, s. 15)*. At both the federal and provincial levels, the population variation for each district should not exceed 25 percent except in extraordinary circumstances. Having ten-councillors allows for a degree of flexibility in redistricting that can satisfy the diverse needs of different communities.