

# Demeaning Democracy: Turning Doug Ford's Attack on Toronto into a Movement for Democratic Renewal

An Open Letter About Bill 5 Better Local Government Act

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*We, the undersigned group of scholars and teachers, deplore the autocratic and arbitrary reduction of ward representation for Toronto city council contained in Bill 5 being rushed through the Ontario Legislature by the just-elected Doug Ford-led Conservative provincial government.*

There are numerous problems with this initiative – both in terms of policy and process – that cannot be squared with democratic values or procedures.

As policy, reducing the number of city councilors will not make for better representation or government or cost reductions for the city, as the Ford government claims. Indeed, as we saw with a similar cynical reduction of MPPs by a previous Conservative government, reducing the number of politicians did not lead to any cost savings, but merely shifted where money was spent in a poor and half-hearted attempt to respond to constituent demands, and had the effect of weakening local influence and centralizing more power at Queen's Park and the Premier's Office.

As policy, reducing the number of city councilors will weaken the democratic representation and advocacy roles so crucial to local government. Fewer wards mean that many more people will be trying to get the attention of fewer politicians. Far from increasing accountability, this will have the effect of insulating politicians from public pressure as bigger wards mean increased costs to run for office and politicians that will be indebted to those who can fund their campaigns. Meanwhile, local citizens will find it much harder to organize a grassroots campaign in these larger wards.

As policy, reducing the number of city councilors will make it harder to have a council that truly reflects the economic and social diversity of the city, as all research on representation shows that winner take all voting systems combined with large riding sizes tend to benefit the most established and powerful groups in society (i.e. wealthy white males) and fail to reflect the class, gender, ethnic and racial diversity of the community.

As process, it is conventional to signal the desirability of such reforms in the campaign

period for provincial office, rather than announcing it after the election when voters now have no ability to consider it in casting their vote.

As process, it is conventional to take input on such proposed changes from the institutional representatives and voters that will be affected by the changes and develop an interactive policy approach that operates on realistic timelines to gain, respond, and act on such input, rather than ram through arbitrary changes just months before they need to be put into practice.

As process, it is conventional for governments elected under the first-past-the-post electoral system, particularly those that have gained a majority of seats but only a minority of the popular vote, to act with caution in taking up divisive policy issues, especially when such issues touch on the democratic rules of the game themselves. To radically alter the representational structure of another level of government, without warning and without input from said government or its electorate, is clearly an abuse of the power that the first-past-the-post voting system grants to legislative majority governments.

At this point, it would be fruitless to demand that the Ford Conservative government reverse its actions on this issue as the government has made it clear by its actions and stated public rationales that its 'reforms' are, like their 'austerity' agenda, ideological in nature, scope and objectives and, as such, not subject to reasoned, informed, evidence-based discussion or deliberation or non-partisan considerations of the public good or fair play. As with conservative movements across western countries, the point of such efforts is to weaken the already shallow substance of democratic representation, deliberation and accountability in favour of strengthening the power of those with substantial wealth.

However, armed with evidence-based insights about these attacks on democracy at both the procedural and institutional levels, we can recommend specific political reforms to help reverse and prevent such undemocratic initiatives in the future. **As such we call on citizens, organized groups in civil society, and the key Ontario opposition parties to support the introduction of the following reforms:**

1. The immediate introduction of a proportional voting system for provincial elections. The results of the 2018 Ontario provincial election and the subsequent actions by the Ford Conservative government demonstrate clearly why the first-past-the-post voting system is a danger to the survival of democracy itself. Conservative governments are increasingly demonstrating their willingness to abuse the democratic trust that is required for FPTP to operate. With just 40% of the popular vote, the Ford Conservatives are pushing through a host of policies that a majority of Ontarians clearly oppose, and they are doing so in a manner that prevents that opposition from organizing and bringing pressure to bear on the government. The opposition parties in Ontario should declare their commitment now to introduce PR after the next election, if they are elected.

2. The establishment of a legitimate public consultative process to determine the proper levels of representation for the city of Toronto, as well as other reforms of governance (like the introduction of a proportional voting system for the city), with a commitment by the provincial government to act on them.

3. A removal of the ban on political parties or slates running for municipal office in Toronto. As research clearly demonstrates that an absence of organized groups at the local level is the key barrier to people running for and participating in local politics, this politically-

motivated restriction should be repealed.

4. Establish a Citizens' Assembly to rethink the role and purpose of local government, including ways to rebalance the influence between the provincial and local levels, and between property developers, ratepayers and tenants. •

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