

# **DOES OUR CITY GOVERNMENT STRUCTURE NEED REFORM?**

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In the upcoming November 10, 2003 municipal election several referendum questions are also on the ballot. Voters are asked if they want to retain the Board of Control and if they want a smaller council to govern our City. Given the importance of municipal governance in London and the impact of the decision on the 330,000 residents, our votes and choices require careful consideration.

Ways to make our administrative processes more efficient are beneficial but this efficiency must not be at the expense of public participation and democratic debate. Debate should be seen as a healthy and important function of Council and part of the democratic process.

Reducing the size of Council by eliminating the Board of Control or reducing the representation of each ward to one councillor will certainly limit the debate and alter the composition of Council and the type of representation from each area of the City. Frequently Councillors with different political philosophies and perspectives are elected from the same ward. Debate is healthy for democracy.

There is no evidence that there will be a cost saving with reducing the number of Councillors and eliminating Board of Control. If Council is smaller there will be incredible pressure to move to full time councillors instead of the current system of part time councillors. Salaries will inevitably be increased to deal with the increased work load. There will also be pressure for full time administrative assistants to deal with the resulting increased volume of work. Full time councillors also will be tempted to get involved with day to day decision making and not stick to policy matters.

The increase in work load and full time commitment for elected City Councillors would effectively preclude many of the current councillors from sitting on Council. Currently at least 11 of the present City Councillors have significant employment responsibilities outside of Council. Careful consideration must be given before we create a set of conditions which will severely limit the number of people who will be prepared to stand for council positions.

At the present time Board of Control serves as an executive finance committee of Council. They deal with legal, personnel and financial matters of Council. These responsibilities will remain even if Board of Control is eliminated. Other models of governance have an executive committee elected from within a City Council to handle these matters. Internal elections within a small group of elected Councillors frequently are determined by deal making and not the basis of competence. The advantage of having a Board of Control, elected City wide, is that the electors get to decide who serves on the executive committee of Council. There is an added advantage of having four Controllers and a Mayor elected City wide, who look out for the City's interest and are not tied as closely to local Ward issues. The balancing of interests, local and City wide is an important function of City Council and the current system helps provide that balance. It is somewhat ironic but other Cities are currently looking at London's model with an elected Board of Control to restructure their own systems of governance.

Council is consulting you the electorate by way of referendum, on various options to be considered and implemented in time for the 2006 municipal election. However, unless there is a turnout of more than 50 percent of registered voters the referendum results are not binding on

City Council.

There have been problems over the past term on Council. But in my view elected councillors had lost control of the City's governance largely through their own actions and dependence on senior administration. However, the structure of a municipal government is, in itself, not the cause of the failures of elected politicians. There no doubt will be problems whatever structure our government will have. Openness and transparency with due diligence and proper delegation of responsibility with the appropriate checks and balances is the best way to govern.

We need to critically examine our governance model but we must ensure that the system of governance is what London needs as we confront the challenges of the 21st Century.